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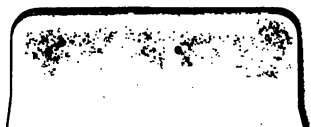
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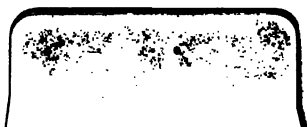
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TOLD AT LAST.







# TOLD AT LAST.

A Novel.

By HELEN DAGLEY.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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# TOLD AT LAST.

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## CHAPTER I.

THE accounts that came from time to time from Hurst Park were by no means so good as could have been desired; Clara certainly did not gain strength. She had so far recovered from the attack of illness brought on in London, as to be able to walk about and amuse herself in her usual way, but her step was less buoyant, her cough more frequent. Lord and Lady Dexham had watched and hoped, trusting that the return of spring would restore her to her usual health and spirits, but they were disappointed.

She did not complain of any pain except an occasional dart in the left side, and she begged her papa and mamma not to look so sad, and worry themselves about her, she was quite well only she got very tired sometimes, and perhaps that was laziness; her papa had always told her she was a very idle girl.

How much Lord Dexham wished it had been  
VOL. II.

laziness; he felt that had such been the case he would never have reproved her for it again; not that he had ever really complained, but he had often said little things in this way to make her angry, as he loved to feel her tiny hands catch hold of the collar of his coat as she tried to give him what she called a good shaking for so insulting her.

There was no fear of his trying to make her angry now, for both his and Lady Dexham's chief desire seemed to be to gratify her every wish.

It is doubtful whether he would not even have invited Captain Macclaughton to Hurst Park had she expressed a wish to that effect; but Clara felt how kindly her papa had acted with respect to Lord Rodock, and the promise he had made her nearly nine months ago, and she resolved to wait patiently until the expiration of the other three.

She and her papa, and Reginal, generally took a long ride every morning when the weather permitted, and this seemed to brace her up for a few hours, but ere the day closed her strength was exhausted.

The physicians whom Lord Dexham consulted said they could do no more for her than had already been done; the chief thing to be attended to was to see that she took as much nourishment as possible; perhaps if she had a young friend about her own age to visit her it might do her good, but they

could not promise that it would have the desired result.

Lady Dexham thought of Earny, but feared she would not like to be again separated from Mr. Montravers, and that she was doubtless now very busy preparing for her marriage, as she knew that much of the work would have to be done at home. ‡

Lord and Lady Dexham, and Lotte, and Reginal, and Clara, had all consulted together respecting some fitting present to make to Earny, and at first they had decided on presenting her with a handsome *trousseau*, but Lotte knew how particular she was on some points, and feared such a present would have too much the appearance of charity; so, at Lord Dexham's suggestion, two thousand pounds were to be invested in her name in the Three per Cent. Consols, the first dividend of which was to be drawn in July next, about which time they supposed the wedding would take place.

Clara had a cousin just returned from Italy, whom she had never seen, but who was reported to be a very nice girl, and Lady Dexham proposed sending her an invitation to Hurst Park.

Clara, however, begged her not to do so, saying, she would rather nobody came except Earny; she should like to have her very much, but she said her mamma must not think of asking her, because she knew she would not like to refuse and yet would prefer remaining at home.

Besides she had Lotte, and darling little Freddy, and her papa and mamma, and Reggy ; and surely, she said, they were company enough for any one.

"If you do not feel dull, Clara, my darling, I am sure I have no wish to invite any visitors here at present," replied her mamma; and nothing further was said on the subject.

Freddy was, as Clara had remarked, a little darling; his fat nose had gradually gained in length what it had lost in breadth, and his flaxen hair lay in soft round curls on his chubby little neck.

He was quite a plaything for the whole family, but, next to his mamma, Aunt Clara was his especial favourite, which was not to be wondered at, as she humoured all his little whims, making herself a complete slave to his capricious fancies.

Lotte and Clara were very good correspondents, and informed Earny of all that went on at Hurst Park, and she, in return, told them as much as she could of her own plans and doings.

Thus Earny heard how unfavourable was the physician's opinion of Clara's case, and she felt satisfied that the course she had adopted was the right one.

"Mamma," said Earny, one morning, after having sat for more than half an hour looking out of the window, whilst the work on which she was employed had fallen neglected on her lap. "I should so like to ask Clara to come and spend a few weeks with us. Would you have any objection?"

"Not in the least, my dear," replied her mamma, "as to having her here; but do you think we could make her comfortable? Things must be so different to what they are at Hurst Park."

"I don't think Clara would care for that, mamma, because she once said when I talked to her about it, that she should like it very much; and I have been thinking that I could make my bedroom very comfortable for her to sleep in; and as Minnie's little playroom opens into it, it would do very nicely for a humble kind of boudoir; the carpet is very good, and with the help of a few nick-nacks and one or two pieces of furniture from the other rooms, it would look quite cozy."

"Then you and Minnie would have to sleep in the attic."

"Yes; that would do very well for us, as the cold weather is all gone."

"And what will you do with Jarvis?"

"Oh, she cannot come; I told Clara I would wait on her myself. If Jarvis came, we should be obliged to have another maid to wait on her."

Her mamma laughed. "What will you do when you have a maid of your own?"

"What do you mean, mamma?" asked Earny, with surprise.

"Don't look so astonished, dear; I was only thinking that when my Earny is mistress of the



Grange, somebody will insist on her being more taken care of than she is at present."

"Oh, mamma, how can you say that?" and Earny's arms were around her mother's neck.

Mrs. Dalton kissed her, and said she could never have parted with her to any one less worthy than Mr. Montravers.

"What will Lord and Lady Dexham say?" continued Mrs Dalton. "Do you think they will allow Clara to come? Will they like her to leave them?"

"That is my only fear," replied Earny. "They may not like to be separated from her. As to her being taken care of, I know Lady Dexham would feel perfectly easy on that point; she said one day that if ever Clara were ill she should send her to you to be made well."

"What could make her say that?" inquired Mrs. Dalton.

"Because she saw you took so much care of me, I suppose," replied Earnestine, giving her mamma another kiss.

"I hardly know what to say about it, Earny dear. Why do you so much wish her to come?"

"Because I want you to know her, dear mamma, and she wants to know you and Minnie. If she gets worse you may never have another opportunity."

"Then you wish us both to form an acquaintance for the pain of losing it again? From what you

have told me of her, I am sure I should soon love her."

"Oh, no, mamma dearest; it is not that I wish to cause you pain—I know that you could not really think that; but I have a feeling that you ought to know each other. If you did, and anything happened to her afterwards, you would have more pleasure in hearing me talk about her."

"I always like it now, my child, and I really should be very happy to see her here, so try if you can get her mamma's consent to her coming."

"Will you write a note to Lady Dexham to inclose in mine to Clara, mamma? If you pressed it very much, I am sure she would not refuse."

"I suppose it would be the right thing to do, but I really do not much like the idea of it. I would do it at once if I knew her."

"You need not mind a bit, mamma; indeed you need not. Lady Dexham is not the least proud, and will think it very kind of you."

"Then I suppose I must try. When do you wish her to come?"

"Directly; that is, in a day or two, as soon as I have put the rooms ready; but we can write at once, perhaps Lady Dexham may not answer the letter immediately."

So Earny brought her mamma her desk, and then sat down to write her own letter to Clara, in which she begged her to remember the promise she once

made her, and not to send a refusal. "We cannot find room for Jarvis," wrote Earny, "but you shall see how well I shine as a waiting-woman, and Minnie is to be your little page.

"Tell your mamma that I do so hope she will let you come; we will try to take such care of you."

Mrs. Dalton's was a very plain, simple note, which expressed just what she meant—that it would give her great pleasure to see Clara and to make the acquaintance of one who had gained such a hold on her child's affections; that she would endeavour to act the part of a mother towards her while with them, and that she trusted Lord Dexam would not withhold his consent.

The letters despatched, Earny finished her work, and then made a tour of inspection to see what she could steal from the sitting-room and drawing-room to furnish her little boudoir.

She selected one or two pieces of furniture and several nick-nacks which would not be missed down stairs, and would be very useful up, but at her mamma's suggestion allowed them to remain in their usual places until she had received a reply that Clara was coming.

The letter was brought into the breakfast-room at Hurst Park, just as Clara, wearied with a sleepless night, was lamenting to her mamma that Mr. Montravers had monopolized her Earny.

"I wish she would offer to come and stay with

me," said she, in a tone, for her, unusually languid ; "I have not seen her for such a long time—not since the beginning of last December, and now it is the middle of April—more than four months."

"Shall I write and ask her to come, Clara, darling ? I will to-day, if you like," said Lady Dexham.

"No, thank you, mamma ; it would be so selfish of me to ask her. If she would offer, I would say 'Yes,' at once."

"Has she told you when she is to be married ?"

"I don't think the time is fixed ; she said she would tell me when it was."

"For Miss Molesworth," said the servant, as Lady Dexham was about to take the letter from the salver.

"It is Earny's handwriting," said Clara, preparing to break the seal. "I daresay it is to say when the day is to be. I mean to be bridesmaid whether she asks me or not."

"Here is an inclosure for you, mamma ; not from Earny, though, perhaps from Mrs. Dalton."

Lady Dexham read the note, but said nothing ; she wished to hear what remark Clara made as to the contents of hers.

"Oh ! mamma, how kind !" said Clara, quickly casting her eye down the sheet. "Earny wants me to pay her a visit. May I go ? I should so like it."

"Would you really? Are you strong enough?" said her mamma, doubtfully.

"Above everything, mamma; and as for strength, it would be just the thing to give it me. Do say I may go, mamma."

"We must see what papa thinks about it, first, my dear. If you really think the change will benefit you, and your papa does not object, I am sure I shall not."

"I will go and ask him," and, forgetting her fatigue, Clara skipped away.

Lord Dexham read the letters, heard what she had to say, and then went to talk it over with his wife.

It was some time before they could come to any decision, but Clara was so anxious to go that Lord Dexham did not like to refuse her, and at last it was agreed that if the physician who would visit Clara on the following day did not disapprove of it, she was to go.

"I shall make him say, 'Yes,'" said Clara; and she kept herself in a continual state of excitement until the physician arrived.

Far from disapproving of it, he said it was a capital plan; as the air in that spot was peculiarly adapted for persons suffering from Miss Molesworth's complaint.

Clara lost no time in writing her reply, and took care that her mamma's answer should be ready to go by that evening's post.

"I knew she would come, mamma," said Earny, as she read the letter aloud. "Saturday evening, she says, and this is Wednesday. I shall have plenty of time if I set to work directly. What does Lady Dexham say?"

"Thanks me for the invitation and all that sort of thing, and asks me if I can procure rooms at some hotel for them, as she and Lord Dexham are themselves coming to bring Clara."

"Oh, mamma, how nice! I wanted Lady Dexham to know you, and now she will. Where can they go?"

"Indeed, I hardly know. Spencer's is a very respectable place; but I fear it is scarcely good enough for them. However, we had better go and make inquiries."

"If Minnie makes haste, we shall have finished her lessons by eleven o'clock, if that will be early enough, mamma?"

"Yes, my dear, I cannot be ready before that; but do not let it be later."

Eleven o'clock came, and Mrs. Dalton and Earny started off to see what accommodation they could find in the town. Spencer's was certainly the only place that had any probability of suiting, and their rooms were not what Mrs. Dalton would have desired for Lord and Lady Dexham; however, as there was nothing better to be had, she promised to give an answer respecting them on Saturday morn-

ing, and hastened home to write a description of them to Lady Dexham, that she might decide whether they were such as they should like to occupy.

Coming in, they met Mr. Montravers coming out, just on his way to find them, and he gave Earny a severe scolding for running away from him in that way.

Minnie had been enlightening him as to the reason of their going away so much earlier than usual, and he told Mrs. Dalton that it was very wrong of her not to have waited for him; it would have been a nice little morning's occupation, and he should have had so much pleasure in doing it.

"Have you succeeded?" he asked.

"So far as to have found some rooms vacant; but they are not such as I should like."

"Have you engaged them?"

"No; I must first write to know if they are likely to be approved."

"Then don't write just yet, I will see what I can do. I rather fancy I know of some somewhere. You are not too tired for another walk, Earny, I hope?"

Earny said she was not tired, but explained how she was going to employ herself.

"Then I suppose I must go alone. It is a great shame, though. I hope this expected young lady

is not going to monopolize you," said Mr. Mon-travers.

Earny laughed, and said he would see.

He departed, and Earny set to work vigorously ; she was just in the act of wheeling a huge rocking horse, a present of Miss Vickers to Minnie, out of the playroom, when she started, from feeling a soft ball thrown at her head, and, turning round, encountered Minnie and Grace laughing at her.

"I have come to make myself useful," said Grace. "I heard business was going on, and thought I should like to have a hand in it. What's to be done?"

Earny told her her plans.

"Famous!" said Grace. "Now, then, set me to work. Suppose you and I, Minnie, take up the carpet and beat it."

Minnie opened her eyes to their full extent. She had an idea that that was not fit work for Grace.

Earny said that Ann was coming to sweep when everything was ready for her, and said she did not like to let Grace do anything.

"Nonsense," said Grace ; "I came on purpose. You had better let me, or I shall get a scolding from somebody else, and that of course will be worse than doing the work."

So to work they set, and in a few hours it was wonderful what a metamorphosis was made of Minnie's playroom.



By-and-by Mr. Montravers returned, and said he had been making inquiries for lodgings, and the result of his search he had written in a note that he handed to Mrs. Dalton, which, if she approved, she was to please inclose in hers to Lady Dexham.

Mrs. Dalton read it.

The purport of which was that hearing from Mrs. Dalton that Lord and Lady Dexham were coming into the neighbourhood, it would give him great pleasure if they would favour his mother and himself with their company, and make his house their home as long as they wished to remain.

"How very thoughtful," said Mrs. Dalton; "but will it not inconvenience Mrs. Montravers?"

"Not in the least. You know we have so many more rooms than we occupy, and my mother is quite pleased at the idea, so you need not say anything about Spencer's. I told my mother they would be here on Saturday evening. That is the day fixed, is it not?"

"Yes; I suppose they will arrive about seven."

"Then I will drive to the station and bring Miss Molesworth here on our way to the Grange. How many will there be? let me see. Lord and Lady Dexham, and Miss Molesworth and myself, that will make four; then there will be plenty of room for Earny, if she will go with me. How are the preparations going on?"

"Admirably, I believe; so Minnie says. I had

scarcely time to hear anything about it at dinner, they were in such haste to get up-stairs again. You know Grace is here?"

"Yes; she told me she was coming, so I presumed she had kept her word, as no one could find her at home."

"I hope Mrs. Montravers has not been wanting her. Shall I ask her to go back?"

"Oh, no, not at all; it was only I who was looking for her to ask her some question about the spare rooms. May I go up to them? Oh, here is Minnie, perhaps she will show me the way. Will you, Pussy?"

"Yes, if mamma says yes."

Her mamma nodded her head in reply, and the child led him up-stairs.

"Vernon!" exclaimed Grace, "what brought you here? We gave orders that no intruders were to be admitted."

"I am come to inspect."

"What do you think of our proceedings," asked Earny, as she held up her hands begrimed with dust, which she had got in turning over a box of old books. "It is hardly fair to give an opinion yet though, we have not nearly finished."

"I cannot see what more you have to do; it is as comfortable a little room as any one could wish to have," said Mr. Montravers, casting his eye round.

"Oh, we have to finish arranging these books in

the shelves, and an ottoman to bring up, and lots of other little things to do."

"Let me arrange the books," said Mr. Montravers.

"Will you really?" asked Earny. "You will do it so much better than I."

"I don't allow that," said he; "nevertheless you shall see what I can do;" and they all remained so long up-stairs together that Mrs. Dalton came up at last to see what had happened.

"I began to have my doubts about the work," said she, smiling, as she softly opened the door and looked in upon them. "I expected to find you all having a comfortable chat together. Do you know what time it is?"

Mr. Montravers looked at his watch, and was surprised to find how quickly an hour had slipped away.

"Come, Grace, we must depart; my mother will be wondering what has become of us."

"I meant to remain here to tea, if Mrs. Dalton would allow me."

"My dear Grace, I am sure it was so very kind of you to come. I am only afraid that you have been tiring yourself out for us when you were wanted at home."

"You had better come back with me, Gracie," said her brother. "Mother may have to consult you about some arrangements."

"Very well ; then I suppose I must ; but I shall come again to-morrow. You see we are to have visitors as well as you, Earny."

"Are you ?" said Earny. "I hope they are not going to remain long ; that is, if they will want you, because I want you also."

"I dare say Lord and Lady Dexham will let me leave them sometimes. Should they make any objection I shall slip out of the back door, or, otherwise, bring them with me."

"You don't mean that they are coming to stay with you ?" asked Earnestine, surprised.

"Yes, they are ; that is, Vernon has written to ask them ; they may refuse," said Grace.

"I am sure they will not," replied Earny. "What a pleasant party it will be !"

"Come, Vernon ; I thought you were in a dreadful hurry ; here are you keeping me waiting such a time," said Grace, catching hold of her brother's arm.

"That is turning the tables, is it not, Mrs. Dalton ?" said he, as he wished her good-by.

In the evening a cart drew up to the door and two men brought into the hall a handsome *prie-dieu* chair, which they said they had had Mr. Montravers's orders to leave at Mrs. Dalton's.

"That is Grace's doing," exclaimed Earny ; "she heard me lamenting to-day that we had not one in the house."

“ Grace may have suggested it, but I do not think she bought it; somebody else took that off her hands, I expect.”

“ Really, Earny, he is very good ; you are a most fortunate girl,” said Mrs. Dalton.

Earny thought she was also, but before she had time to express her thoughts she had quite changed her opinion.

Lord and Lady Dexham wrote a very polite note to accept the hospitality of the Grange, and Mrs. Montravers was in a better humour than she had been for many months previously.

## CHAPTER II.

"THIS is Saturday morning, Earny," said Minnie, waking her sister up at six o'clock on the day on which Clara was expected. "Shall I get up? We must make haste or we never shall be ready." The poor child had been counting the hours ever since she had been told she was to be Miss Molesworth's little page.

Dick frightened her at first by saying "she would have to wear breeches and buttons, and stand up at the back of the carriage by herself;" but Earny would not allow her pleasure in the prospect to be marred, and soon set her mind at rest.

Earny was very sleepy and soon dropped off again, much to Minnie's vexation.

"Earny, sister Earny, it is getting so late. Do wake up, please;" and, as a sure method of rousing her sister, she commenced covering her face and neck with kisses.

"I don't think it is late, Minnie, darling. Where

is the sun? I don't see it," said Earny, drawing the clothes more tightly around her as she spoke.

"Because you do not open your eyes. Look, there it is on the table."

"Yes, I see," said Earny, slightly raising her chin over the clothes, as if that would enable her to see through the closed eyelids, and was soon fast asleep again.

"Oh dear, dear!" said Minnie, as she saw how unsuccessful her efforts had been. "They will all be here. I wish mamma would come. I don't know what to do;" and she felt almost inclined to cry. Presently she got outside the clothes and seated herself so as to command a full view of Earny's face.

"When she opens her eye one little bit I shall speak to her again," said she, talking aloud to herself. "I am sure b-r-eakfast must be ready." (Earny had taken so much pains to make her speak plainly, that now, if she were only talking to her doll, and she had to say a difficult word, she tried to conquer it). "I wonder if she would be very angry if I gave her a little pinch?" Twice the child stretched forth her hand to put her purpose into execution; but she could not summon courage to perform it. "What can I do?" said she, giving up her original intention. "Let me see—I know—I'll put all the things ready," and, sliding off the bed, she looked about for Earny's stockings. "I see them,"

said she at last, and sat down on the floor. Then she turned one inside out, and commenced trying to turn in the foot as she had seen Earny do before she put them on. This was rather a difficult operation for Miss Minnie; for, instead of drawing the foot through as she turned the stocking, she tried to push it in afterwards, and, as may be supposed, could not succeed. However, she persevered for some time, and then not being able to manage it, replaced them whence she had taken them. She stood looking at her sister for a few minutes, but not seeing her move, turned away to try to find something else to forward the dressing operations.

"Oh! her brush and comb," said she, running up to the dressing-table, and opening the drawer she took them out and placed them by the side of the pincushion. "What comes next? Hair-pins and pomade. Where can the pomade be? Oh, I know; sister Earny gave it me to bring up-stairs yesterday, from her room, and I forgot it—I am so sorry; but I mustn't go down, I know," continued the child, pausing as she pronounced each sentence. "I think I could wash myself. I shall try,"—and going towards the washing-stand she endeavoured to lift the jug out of the basin in which it rested; but it had not entered her little head to reason on the difference between the washing-stand in her sister's own room—which was a strong mahogany one with



a marble slab, and so in no danger of tipping over—and that now before her, a three-cornered, flimsy little article, that a very slight movement would overthrow. Thus, as she put her little foot on the lower bar to enable her to reach the jug more easily, it tilted forward, and poor Minnie was deluged with water. Fortunately, as her foot slipped off the bar, she stretched out her arm to save herself, and this coming in contact with the stand, made it rebound, and consequently prevented a general smash.

Minnie's exclamation, and the noise made by the rattling of the crockery, awoke Earny; and, starting up, she beheld her little sister looking the picture of woe. There she was, standing with her little bare feet swimming in water, and her soaked night-dress clinging in wet folds to her little figure. The expression on her face grew a shade less rueful as she saw that her misfortune had been the means of rousing Earny, and rubbing her fingers across her eyes to wipe away the fast falling tears, she exclaimed, "Don't scold, sister Earny; there is nothing broken. I am so glad you are awake."

"What were you doing?" asked Earny, jumping out of bed, and beginning to remove the dripping garment.

"I was going to wash, Earny, for 'tis so late. I know 'tis, and you wouldn't wake up."

"Is it?" said Earny. "Here, rub away with this towel while I look at my watch. Ten minutes to seven. Why, we are only five minutes later than usual. What a puss you are!"

"Is that all?" said Minnie, opening her eyes in amazement. "I thought it was nine o'clock nearly, and they will be here soon."

"Not for quite twelve hours; however, we will soon be dressed now. Poor child! how cold you look," and, throwing on her dressing-gown, Earny quickly put on Minnie's clothes and sent her down stairs to warm herself.

"My hair," said Minnie, pulling out one of her curl papers.

"Never mind that now, darling; you can come up to me again when you are nicely warmed," and the child, with a heart light in expectation of the coming pleasure, skipped away.

A visitor coming to live in the house was a great event in Minnie's life, for she never remembered such a thing having occurred before, and the preparations that had been made to receive her greatly heightened its importance in her eyes; besides, they were to have a high tea—that is, dinner (a second dinner) and tea together—thinking Clara might require some substantial refreshment after her journey, and Minnie thought this a great treat; and then she was to remain up an hour later than usual; she had begged so earnestly not to be sent

to bed the minute Miss Molesworth arrived, that her mamma could not refuse her.

All these things made it a day of great importance to her, and half-a-dozen times in an hour would she run to ask Ann what o'clock it was.

Mr. Montravers called to take up Earny, and then Minnie stationed herself at the window to watch for their arrival.

"I will tell you, mamma, the moment they come in sight; I can see quite well. Don't you trouble to watch, mamma, I will tell you;" and Mrs. Dalton, to please her, took a seat on the other side of the room.

It was getting dark, and Minnie flattened her nose against the pane, in her anxiety to catch a glimpse of the horses as they turned the corner of the road.

"Here they are, mamma! No, it is not, it is Dr. Biggs. What a time they are! I wish they would come. Now I really think I see them;" thus did Minnie continually exclaim long before they had even had time to arrive at the station.

Her patience was nearly exhausted, when she heard the tramp of horses' feet, and before she could, in the darkness, distinguish what it was, the carriage drove up to the door.

"Oh, here they come, mamma!" exclaimed she, clapping her hands with delight, as she jumped off her stool, and ran to her mamma's side.

In an instant Mrs. Dalton was in the hall inviting them to enter.

Earny and Mr. Montravers had arranged that they were all to go in for a few minutes, that Lord and Lady Dexham might be introduced to her mamma; consequently, as soon as the door was opened, he jumped out and assisted the others to alight.

"Lord and Lady Dexham, mamma," said Earny, as they entered the hall.

"Though a stranger by sight, by no means so in reality," said Lady Dexham, taking Mrs. Dalton's proffered hand; "your daughter has so often talked to me about you that you seem quite like an old friend."

"I am sure I can quite reciprocate the feeling," replied Mrs. Dalton. "I have to thank you all for your great kindness to my dear child."

"Not at all," said Lord Dexham; "the kindness is on your part. Clara cannot get on without her."

"This is Clara, mamma," said Earny, who had been waiting an opportunity to introduce them. "This is Clara, whom you have promised to take such care of; she is to be your child while she remains here, so you must give her a mother's kiss of welcome."

Mrs. Dalton bent down and impressed a kiss on the fair young cheek, saying how glad she was to see her there, and Clara thanked her by a kiss in return.

If any one had had leisure to notice Earnestine during the last few minutes they could not but have remarked the strange expression which rested on her face as this little scene was being enacted—one in which self-satisfaction and joy were blended with intense pain and a great internal struggle; but no one saw it, and it quickly passed away.

“And this is Miss Minnie, I suppose,” said Lord Dexham, following Mrs. Dalton and the others into the sitting-room, and catching hold of the child, who had kept close to her mamma. “No one thinks us of sufficient importance to introduce us, so I shall introduce myself. So you are the little flaxen-haired girl that sister Earny dreams about. Won’t you give me a kiss?”

Minnie put up her little mouth to receive the offered kiss, but she could not find courage to utter a word.

“Minnie darling, come and speak to your new mistress.”

“I have engaged her as your little page,” said Earny, addressing Clara.

“What a darling!” said Clara; “I shall eat her.”

Minnie was by no means frightened at the threat, and at once held out her hand and voluntarily gave her a kiss.

They could not remain long, as dinner was waiting for them at the Grange; they had taken one look at Earny’s home—that home of which she was

so fond, and, short as the visit had been, they no longer wondered at her loving it so much.

"We shall all meet again to-morrow," said Lady Dexham, as she stepped into the carriage.

"Good night, Clara darling;" and they drove away.

Clara's things were soon taken off by Earny, who would insist on doing everything herself.

"Remember, Minnie and I have entered upon our situations, and I mean to be a regular Jarvis," said she, removing the innumerable wrappers in which Clara was encased.

"Now, my dear Miss Molesworth," said Mrs. Dalton, "make yourself comfortable in that easy-chair by the fire, and put your feet on the footstool, while Earny makes the tea. You will excuse my calling you my dear, but I am so accustomed to say it to my own children that I forget."

"Please call me so, and Clara also; not Miss Molesworth. Will you please?"

Mrs. Dalton promised to do so if she wished it, and the tears gathered in her eyes as, looking at Clara, she saw how plainly the impress of an early death was stamped on the fair young face.

Earny was greatly shocked at her appearance; she had not seen her for more than four months—not since the time of the school feast, when the old women had so alarmed her by their opinion of Clara's health, and she never expected to have seen

her so altered in so short a time. She knew from the accounts received from Hurst Park that she was weaker and thinner, and she expected to find a difference, but not such a one as she now saw.

Fair and fragile before, Clara was ten times more so now; she was very beautiful, but, as the old women said, the earthliness of it had almost departed.

She was very tired with her journey, and could take but little refreshment.

Mrs. Dalton proposed that she should go to bed. She said she would do so presently, and then fell asleep in the arm-chair in which Mrs. Dalton had placed her.

The tea-things had been removed, and Minnie was gone to bed, so Mrs. Dalton and Earny sat by silently and worked, each occupied with her own thoughts.

Earny's were very strange ones that evening. She went back in memory to the time when she was a little child and had clung to her mamma's neck as she took leave of her for India; then, recollections of many things her godmamma had said to her when she lived with her, before she was old enough to go to school; then, the school-days themselves, and her acquaintance with Lotte. Ah! if she had not known Lotte, should she have known Clara? Probably not; and, if not, Clara would not have been there. Would it not have been

better if circumstances had never thrown them together? She lifted her head, and her eye rested on her mamma, sitting quietly sewing opposite to her, whose expression showed that her thoughts also had travelled far from the work on which she was engaged; and the wish she had once so strongly expressed, that she had never seen Hurst Park, grew yet stronger within her, until the tears gathered in her eyes and her heart felt very sad. However, they had met, and having met, was she right in the path she had pursued? She had invited her there. Was this as it should be? Yes; her conscience whispered yes. It had cost her many a hard struggle, but she had conquered them. She and Clara were together in her own home. Thus far all was well. What would come next? Earny knew what would come next; but the end she could not see clearly.

Presently, Dick knocked at the door; he was taking private lessons now, and was seldom at home more than three evenings in the week. His knock roused Clara, and, opening her eyes, she looked surprised at finding herself in her present position, and said, "Oh dear! Have I been asleep?"

"A little while, dear," replied Earny. "Are you very tired?"

"Yes, rather. I think I have been dreaming. I can't quite remember what it was about though; but it had something to do with you and Lotte,



and a wood. Oh ! I know now ; it was about some gipsies ; about our fortunes. Do you recollect our having them told, Earny, the day we went for that pic-nic ?”

“ Yes dear, quite well.”

“ It has all come back to me in my dream. I saw that ugly old woman standing beside me with such a disagreeable smile on her face ; and she kept repeating—‘ It has come true, you see. It has come true, you see.’ The remembrance of it makes me feel quite uncomfortable.”

“ Do not let it do that, Clara dear,” said Mrs. Dalton. “ It was but a dream and will soon pass off.”

“ Has Earny ever told you what that old woman said to us ?” asked Clara. “ What horrid characters she gave us, especially me !”

“ Oh, yes ! Earny gave me and Minnie quite an entertaining account of your day’s pleasure. I daresay the old woman thought you considered her to be a very clever personage.”

“ Then, Mrs. Dalton, you do not think they really know anything ? You think it is all pretence, and made up ?” said Clara.

“ Certainly, my dear Miss Molesworth. How can they know more about what is to happen to us than we know ourselves ? It is their way of getting a living.”

“ Oh ! I am so glad to hear you say so ; for she told me I was deceitful and false, and everything

that is bad ; and I am sure I hope it is not true."

"No one who knows you could ever think you anything of the kind, Clara dear," said Earny. "So that shows how foolish it is to believe such people."

"My nephew, Dick, Miss Molesworth," said Mrs. Dalton, as he just then entered the room. "How late you are to-night," continued his aunt.

"Yes, that old skeleton is always an hour behind his time, and there we sit throwing books at each other's heads till we kick up a fine row. Dr. Twickham came in and caught us this evening, and here have I a hundred lines of Virgil to write out, and take to him to-morrow morning. He'll have to whistle for it ; that's all I can tell him."

"But you must do it, Dick. You will have it doubled if you do not," said Earny.

"Not I ! It's ten chances to one if he ever asks for it ; and if he did, he would shy it into the fire without looking at it."

"I hope you are better," said Dick, thinking civility required him to address some observation to Clara.

"Yes, thank you ; only I am rather tired to-night. I think, if you will allow me, Mrs. Dalton, I will take your advice, and go to bed."

"Do, dear ; and don't move to-morrow morning until you see Earny."

"Oh, I shall be quite well to-morrow, and able

to get up in good time. At what hour do you breakfast?"

"Earny will tell you that when she comes to call you," said Mrs. Dalton, kissing her and wishing her good night.

And Earny took her up-stairs and introduced her to her apartments.

"What a dear little room," exclaimed Clara, as she entered the *ci-devant* playroom, in which a bright fire was burning in the grate. "Is this your boudoir?"

"It is yours, dear," replied Earny. "I hope you will find it is comfortable. It is a very humble one compared to those at Hurst Park."

"It looks ten times more snug. What a pretty chair," said Clara, seating herself in the *prie-dieu* which Mr. Montravers had sent. "I am almost too tired to talk much to-night, Earny; but I must say one thing, because I know you will like to hear it, and that is that I am sure I shall love your mamma. I felt it the moment she gave me that kiss when you introduced us in the hall."

"I hope you will, Clara darling. I don't think you would be able to help doing so if you tried, and I am certain she will love you."

"Do you think so, Earny? You know I am not like you; perhaps she will think me too giddy. I hope she will not, for I do so much want her to love me. I cannot think why, but I seem to want it very much indeed."

"Dearest Clara, your wish will be granted. God has so arranged it," said Earny; "but mamma will scold us both unless you soon let me prepare you for bed;" so saying, she commenced unfastening Clara's dress.

"I can undo it myself, thank you, dear," said Clara. "I am learning to be more useful. I don't let Jarvis do nearly so much for me as she did."

"Why not, Clara dear? Why should you do it when she is there to do it for you?"

"I thought I would try. I wanted to be more like you, Earny! You are so much better than I am; you help every one, and I help no one."

"Oh, Clara! you must never say such a thing again; think how differently we have been brought up."

"That seems to me to make it so much the worse. If you had been in my place, and had the means that I have, you would have done so much good. I used not to think about such things; but lately, Earny dear, I have wished I was a better girl. Will you try to teach me while I am here?"

Earny could not speak; tears choked her utterance. She saw that a higher power was teaching her what she needed, and drawing her nearer to Himself, and pillowing her head on her shoulder as she knelt by her side, Earny covered her forehead with kisses.

Clara could scarcely understand why Earny

should have been so overcome by her remarks. She did not herself guess how soon there would be no longer need of any earthly teaching.

Earny would not let her talk any more, but undressed her as quickly as she could, and then left her, asking if she might come in once more to take a peep at her as she went up to bed.

An hour afterwards, and she and her mamma stole in and found Clara in a quiet sleep. At Earny's request, Mrs. Dalton bent over her and softly touched her cheek. The touch was too light to wake her; but she felt it, and instinctively moved her lips in return.

## CHAPTER III.

"COME in," said Clara, in answer to a light tap at her bedroom door on the following morning, and in a minute Earny was standing by her side, holding her breakfast on a small tray.

"Oh dear! Earny, is that you? What time is it?"

"Nearly ten, dear. How are you this morning?"

"Very well, I daresay, only I am not sufficiently awake to know. Why did you let me sleep so late?"

"Mamma would not allow me to disturb you earlier. She would not have let me come to you now, only Mr. Montravers has been here, and he says that your papa and mamma are coming presently, so she thought you would perhaps like to be dressed before they came."

"Yes, that I should. What a shame to trouble you to bring up my breakfast."

"Do you forget what office I fill?" said Earny, propping up the pillows so as to make a support for Clara to lean against. "Your little page wished very much to accompany me, but I thought she had better wait until another day."

"Are you going to stay with me while I eat my breakfast? If not, do send Minnie up. I want to make friends with her."

Earny went down and sent Minnie to her mistress, with strict injunctions to let her know when Clara was ready to be dressed.

Accordingly, as soon as the tray was placed on one side, and Clara stepped out of bed, Minnie said she must go and tell Earny.

"What for?" asked Clara; "she knows I am going to get up."

"Yes; but she is coming to dress you."

"Oh no, she is not. I am going to dress myself. Don't you think I must be a baby to want any one to do it for me? Earny does it for herself."

"Yes," again said the child, looking doubtfully at the door; "but Ann says you are a great lady, and Earny said I was to tell her."

"Cannot you help me instead?" asked Clara, as Minnie was moving towards the door.

She looked very pleased at the proposal and stood still for a minute, as if pondering what she ought to do.

"What will Earny say?" she asked at last.

"Why, that you are my little page, and must do what I tell you."

This seemed to settle the child's doubts, and she made herself so useful that Clara was quite dressed when Earny made her appearance to see if she had finished breakfast.

"Minnie!" said Earny, in a tone of surprise, as she noted the state of the case.

Minnie was going to explain, but Clara did it for her, and told Earny she could have no one interfering with the orders she gave her own page.

"You naughty girl! I must not let you trick me so again," said Earny, as they went down stairs together.

Clara had only just had time to wish Mrs. Dalton good morning, and to answer a few inquiries respecting her health, when the carriage drove up, containing Lord and Lady Dexham and Grace.

"Miss Montravers has kindly brought us to improve our acquaintance," said Lord Dexham, as he entered the breakfast-room, and shook hands with Mrs. Dalton and kissed Clara. We were so late last evening that we had but a glimpse of Miss Dalton's home, of which we have heard so much. Miss Montravers says there is a charm about it that she cannot describe, and so we have come to find it out for ourselves."

Mrs. Dalton smiled, and said she thought Earny carried the charm about with her, at least she missed it when she was from home; and Earny thanked her mamma with her eyes, and thought that she and Minnie were its only true charms.

"Mrs. Montravers has kindly asked us to bring you back with us to luncheon; if Mrs. Dalton will allow



us," said Lady Dexham, addressing Clara; "she wishes to be introduced to you."

Earny felt a little annoyed. "Why could not Mrs. Montravers have come with Lady Dexham, and thus have seen Clara without taking her from them the very morning after her arrival?"

Grace saw what was passing in her mind, and wished her mamma were as much a real lady as Mrs. Dalton; she would have proposed that she and Earny should accompany them, only she knew that her mamma had not included them in the invitation, and would, therefore, treat them with barely cold civility. She scarcely tolerated Earny when they were alone, and Grace felt sure she would not do so when in company with Lord and Lady Dexham, who were considered such dons.

She was very pleased at having them for her guests, and intended to invite a few of the most respectable families to meet them, as soon as she knew how long they meant to remain.

Mrs. Dalton, of course, made no opposition to giving up Clara for a few hours, and the morning passed away in much pleasant conversation until Mr. Montravers called in on his way from the station, where he had been inquiring after one of Clara's boxes which had not reached its destination.

"You are coming back with us, Earny?" said he, more in a tone of confirmation than as an interrogatory.

"No, thank you," replied Earny. "Clara is, if you will take proper care of her"—she was going to say, "as much as if it were myself," but she checked herself.

"Why not? Surely you are not too busy this morning. I thought Grace came on purpose to bring you. I was afraid I should not be back in time."

He did not know that Grace had been commissioned to bring only Clara.

"Why cannot you come?" he asked again.

Earny smiled; his mother's dislike to the match was no secret between them, and in a manner devoid of all pique, she said softly, "I am wanted here, but not there."

"I want you, dearest," whispered he in return. "Do come."

"I would rather not," she said; and he did not press it further. Whenever any remarks like these occurred, and they did occasionally, he always comforted himself with the thought that one day she would be his own, and then let any one slight her at their peril!

"The carriage is at the door whenever you wish for it," said he, turning to Lord Dexham. "I fear we have not much time to spare."

"Come, Clara darling; put on your bonnet, if Mrs. Dalton will kindly excuse you," said Lady Dexham, and the three girls quickly disappeared together.

"What do you think of Clara, Mrs. Dalton?" asked Lady Dexham, as Earny closed the door.

"Do you think she looks very ill?"

"I am scarcely a fair judge as I have never seen her before. I cannot compare her with what she used to be," replied Mrs. Dalton, who did not like to confirm the mother's worst fears.

"But do you think she looks delicate—*very*, I mean?" said Lady Dexham. "All the physicians whom we have consulted, say she is. We are almost afraid to allow ourselves to think so."

"She seems to me to be very fragile," replied Mrs. Dalton, "and requires, I should think, great care. I hope this little change may benefit her. I assure you no effort on my part shall be wanting to see that she is properly nursed."

"I am quite sure of that, my dear Mrs. Dalton." I told Clara that if she were ill I must send her to you to be made well again. Earny is such a perfect specimen of your care in every way."

Mr. Montravers heard Earny's name pronounced as he was talking to Lord Dexham by the window, and, thinking she was forming the topic of conversation, turned to catch the words.

"How long that idle puss is," said Lord Dexham, fancying Mr. Montravers was getting impatient. "I am sure I could put on my bonnet in half the time. May I ask you to hasten her, Mrs. Dalton? I fear we shall keep Mrs. Montravers waiting."

Mr. Montravers said he knew the way, and was moving towards the door when in they all came.

"When are we to see Clara back again?" asked Earny, as they were about to drive off.

"Very soon," said Lord Dexham. "I will bring her myself soon after luncheon."

"Will you?" thought Mr. Montravers. "I intend to deprive you of that pleasure."

Luncheon had been waiting some time, and Mrs. Montravers was not particularly well pleased that Mrs. Dalton should detain her guests so long.

She did not allow herself to remember that their visit was really not to her, but to a family whom she considered so much beneath her; and when she remarked with what respect Lord Dexham treated her son, she grew more and more angry with Earny for having usurped that son's affections when they might, she assured herself, have been bestowed so successfully on Clara.

She had heard Vernon once remark how very pretty Miss Molesworth was, and, when she found that Clara was coming on a visit to Mrs. Dalton, she trusted that something might occur to alienate his affections from Earny and centre them on her. It was, therefore, with this view that she determined to invite her to the Grange as often as she possibly could without Earny.

As they stepped out of the carriage, Lord Dexham and his wife entered the hall together, and Mr.

Montravers offered his arm to Clara, to take her to introduce her to his mother.

As they entered the room, thus arm-in-arm, Mrs. Montravers smiled, and said, in her heart, that "Clara should be her daughter-in-law."

During luncheon, Lord Dexham asked Clara what message he was to give to a friend of hers on whom they meant to call the next day, on their way home?

"You are not going to leave us to-morrow, I trust, my lord," said Mrs. Montravers, before Clara had time to reply.

"Thank you; I think we must. Lady Dexham is anxious to return. We merely came to bring Clara, because we could not let her travel alone."

"But now you are here, do remain with us a few days. It would give us so much pleasure to have your company. A few days could not make much difference."

"I am afraid we cannot; thank you," said Lady Dexham, replying for her husband. "My son's little boy has been very ill with the whooping-cough, and I promised his wife that I would be with her some time to-morrow."

"But I am sure your daughter wishes you to remain. Cannot you persuade your mamma to do so?" continued Mrs. Montravers, addressing Clara.

"Yes, I should like her to do so if she could; but I know my sister Lotte will be very disappointed

if she does not return. Poor little Freddy requires so much nursing. Does he not, mamma?"

"Yes, dear; I hope I shall find him better; and you see, Mrs. Montravers, we leave Clara in such very good hands that we feel quite comfortable on her account."

"I am sure my son will only be too happy to do anything in his power to amuse her while she remains in the neighbourhood. I fear she will find it rather dull; some of the people are by no means superior."

"Thank you; but I am sure it will be impossible for her to feel dull while with Mrs. Dalton and her family, they are all so very kind; and Earny is quite like a sister to Clara."

"Yes; she finds it very pleasant to go to Hurst Park, I believe," said Mrs. Montravers, trying to insinuate that it was for that reason alone that she cared for their friendship. "I am sure it is very kind of you to take so much notice of her. Of course, it is a great advantage to her to mix in such society as yours, and gives her a style which she would not otherwise have."

"Indeed!" said Lady Dexham, "I fear you give us credit for doing more than we deserve. Miss Dalton was an elegant lady-like girl long before she came to Hurst Park. I suppose she must have been born so, for my son's wife, who was one of her schoolfellows, says she never knew her to be any-

thing else; but it is her character that I admire, even more than her personal appearance."

"I cannot say that she is a girl that I particularly admire," remarked Mrs. Montravers. "I prefer something more soft and feminine;" and she looked at Clara.

"I am sorry you do not," said Lady Dexham, and added, in an under tone, "She and your handsome son seem to me to be so well suited to each other."

"I must beg your pardon for differing from you, Lady Dexham. I think my son might have chosen one more his equal in position, in family, in every way; indeed, I do not believe that this is anything more than a passing fancy on his part; but her family are so anxious for it that they fan the flame in every way. Poor Mrs. Dalton! I cannot blame her so much as pity her. It is but natural that she should try to get a settlement for her daughter."

Lady Dexham did not argue the point. She saw how adverse Mrs. Montravers was to the connexion, and almost despised her for her meanness of spirit. She would have taken up the cudgels in Earny's behalf had not Mrs. Montravers been her hostess; but, being such, she felt she could not do it with propriety.

Lord Dexham and Mr. Montravers were by this time deep in the discussion of some political opinion; and Grace had carried off Clara to show her some of her pet birds, so that Lady Dexham

and Mrs. Montravers were quite alone. Presently they returned, Clara looking tired and weary, and Lady Dexham proposed that her papa should take her back to the cottage.

Mrs. Montravers was going to oppose it, when her son said that he meant to have the pleasure of driving her home, and this quite altered the state of the case. Had his mother thought that his reason for doing so was that he might get a little talk with Earny to make up for the disappointment of the morning, she would not so readily have acquiesced in his plan.

Earny was very glad to see him. She had felt rather low-spirited since his morning visit, and while Clara rested herself under Mrs. Dalton's care, she and Mr. Montravers took a quiet walk into the green fields, and when she returned she was quite herself again.

Lord and Lady Dexham started, as they had proposed, on the day following—Clara having received strict injunctions from her papa to behave like a good child until he saw her again.

"I intend to try, papa, dear," said Clara, kissing him, and the tone conveyed more meaning than he had expected.

From that hour Mrs. Dalton felt that Clara was a sacred trust committed to her keeping; sacred, because so soon to be taken from her to be parted for ever on earth; and it was almost with a mother's



solicitude, and, ere many days had passed, a mother's love, that she guarded her from every cutting wind, every possible weariness of foot or voice, and nursed her even as she would have done one of her own children.

Earny was unremitting in her care and attention, and Minnie was delighted with every little service she could perform for one so loving and beloved as Clara.

Mr. Montravers and Grace were frequent visitors; indeed, seldom an evening passed that either one or the other did not spend it at the cottage. Sometimes they both came; but not often, for they did not like to leave Mrs. Montravers too much alone. Grace was the one now most generally kept at home, for Mrs. Montravers had no objection to her son's absence since, as she hoped, some object would be gained by it.

Very pleasant evenings these were. Earny and Clara were both good musicians, and had, as we have before remarked, very sweet voices. Clara's was weaker than formerly, but she still retained the clear full tone for which her voice had been always so much admired. If Mr. Montravers were there he would join in a glee, or otherwise, Grace would accompany them on her harp, which Earny had asked her to keep at the cottage during Clara's stay.

Occasionally the music would be laid aside and

Mr. Montravers would read some interesting book aloud, while the others worked and listened.

His carriage was always at their command, and there was scarcely any spot of interest in the neighbourhood to which he did not drive them. It was not often that Mrs. Dalton accompanied them in these excursions, for she did not wish Mrs. Montravers to think that she had usurped the mother's place by the son's side.

Earny had once felt the same, but she did not seem to care for it now, and Mrs. Montravers's sarcasm generally fell on her ear unheeded.

Three weeks thus passed, and then Mr. Montravers was obliged to go to London, and this put an end to all the morning's driving; but the evenings were passed much in the same way as before he left. Clara was certainly getting stronger, and could take a moderately lengthened walk without feeling too much fatigued, and she wrote to tell her mamma that she was getting quite well again.

"Earny, mamma says that I have been here long enough," said Clara, as she folded up a letter received by that morning's post. "She is afraid you must find me troublesome. Do you? Do tell me if you would rather I went home."

"Oh, Clara darling, you know I should like to keep you always; and, indeed, we cannot spare you yet. You must not go. Must she, mamma?" asked Earny, as Mrs. Dalton came into the room.

“What, dear?”

“Clara must not go home yet; must she? Lady Dexham has written to ask if you are not tired of her. There is no fear of that being the case; is there, dearest mamma?”

“No, indeed; and I cannot part with you yet, unless it is your own wish to go,” said Mrs. Dalton, smoothing down Clara’s hair, as she sat on a low stool by the window.

It was a habit Mrs. Dalton had, that of smoothing down the hair of those whom she loved very much. She often did Earny’s, and sometimes Minnie’s, but this was the first time she had done so to Clara, and the action made Earny start. It was a kind of family prerogative bestowed now upon Clara. She was sitting, too, upon the low stool, Earny’s favourite seat, at her mother’s feet. A vacant chair was close beside, and Mrs. Dalton seating herself in it, Clara laid her head on her lap, and pressing the hand resting on her own, said, “I should like to remain with you a little longer, dear Mrs. Dalton.”

Earny looked on, and the slightest shade of jealousy, the first she had ever felt, glanced through her heart. It was her own place; her own position. How came another to occupy it? She almost fancied that it was herself sitting there, and that she standing near was some other, or only a vision of her own fancy; but Clara spoke and proved to

her that it was reality. A tear glistened in her eye for one instant, then she brushed it off, and turned and left the room.

It was some minutes before she returned ; but when she did, the jealousy had been rooted out, not stifled, and her voice was clear and kind as usual, as she addressed some trifling observation to Clara, who was still sitting in the same position at her mother's feet.

"Then I may write and tell mamma that you are not quite tired of me ; may I Earny ? You know I have not yet learnt what you promised to teach me, and I promised papa I would."

"What is that, dear ?" asked Mrs. Dalton.

"To try to be more like Earny. I should so like to be so good as she is, Mrs. Dalton ; but it is so hard now. I ought to have learnt when I was a child."

She seemed scarcely more than a child now, and Mrs. Dalton told her so, and said Earny would not like to hear her say such things. She did not add that she thought it would be difficult for any one to be quite like Earny, and Earny could only say, "Please don't, Clara dear." How guilty she felt for having admitted that spark of jealousy to enter her heart. How unworthy was she to be taken as an example by one so gentle, so humble-minded ! Poor Earny ! she never quite forgave herself for that evening's fault, and tried to atone for it in renewed attentions to Clara's comfort.

"Mamma and papa always said you spoilt me, Earny," said Clara, as the former was arranging her pillow comfortably for the night. "I did not quite like it then, but I am sure now it is true." And Earny wished her good night, thinking how very dear she was becoming to them all. Dick always called her a poor little thing. He said he should not be surprised any day at a puff of wind blowing her away; and if she were in the room his movements were always more quiet and gentlemanly.

Minnie was never tired of waiting on her, and considered it quite wrong for any one else to fetch what she required.

"What a dear little darling you are," said Clara, as she came into the room one morning, bringing her a glass of wine and a biscuit. "I wish I had a little sister like you."

"Do you?" said Minnie. "Why haven't you one?"

"Because mamma never gave me one, pet. Will you come and live with me, and be mine?"

"I couldn't do that, because there's Earny, and she wouldn't like it."

"But if I ask her to give you up, and she says 'Yes,' will you come? I have such a dear little nephew at home that you could play with."

"Doesn't he teaze?" asked Minnie, Dick being the only specimen she had ever known in the nephew line.

"Not at all; he is quite a baby yet; only a year old. Would you not like to nurse him?"

"Yes, very much; could you not bring him here?"

"No; his mamma cannot part with him. You must come and live with me, and then you can nurse him every day."

"But I can't be your little sister. I am Earny's, and she wouldn't never like me to go away. I know she wouldn't; and then there is mamma. I couldn't go; that I couldn't," and the child shook her head with great decision.

"Here is Earny coming, I think, and your mamma with her. I shall ask them."

"No, I can't go, Miss Molesworth, really I can't. Can I, mamma?" said the child, rushing up to Mrs. Dalton as she entered the room.

"Where, dear?" asked her mamma, wondering what the cause of contention could be.

"Miss Molesworth wants me to be her little sister, and to go away from you and Earny, and nurse her little nephew; but you wouldn't like me to go, mamma, to live all away from you. Would you?"

"No; I cannot part with my little Minnie, and I am sure Earny cannot. Can you, Earny?"

Earny said that she could not, but that she should live where she was, and be a sister to both of them.

"Yes, that will do very nicely," said the child, and, comforted by this arrangement, she began

nursing her doll instead of the little one-year-old nephew.

"What a funny little cradle that is of Minnie's," said Clara, as Minnie drew it forth from a low cupboard, the receptacle of many of her best playthings, and gently rocked her doll to sleep.

"Yes; it is rather a curiosity," said Mrs. Dalton. "Has Minnie never shown it to you? I don't know why she has it out to-day, it is generally kept for birthdays and holidays. Bring it here, Minnie dear."

"What is it made off?" asked Clara, as she examined the curious fibre of which it was composed.

"I am not sure, but I think it is made from the bark of a tree. It was given to Earny when she was quite a baby, by a woman whose husband had brought it from some part of America—Canada, I think. She took a great fancy to Earny, and asked me to let her accept it."

"It must be very strong to have lasted so many years."

"Yes it is; but Earny was always a very careful child with her playthings, and I think it was in quite a perfect condition when she gave it to Minnie. This little puss is rather destructive."

"Oh, mamma, do look at Earny, she is all white!" exclaimed Minnie, letting fall doll and cradle together.

Earny was standing by the window, her back

leaning against the shutter, and her face, as Minnie had remarked, of a ghastly whiteness.

Mrs. Dalton, in alarm, ran up to her just in time to prevent her falling, and carried, or rather dragged, her to the sofa.

"The smelling-bottle, Minnie! in my room, quick! and Ann—tell Ann to come directly," cried Mrs. Dalton.

Minnie ran off for the smelling-bottle, and Clara rushed to the kitchen to find Ann, whom she brought with her. Mrs. Dalton had summoned Ann to send her for Dr. Biggs, but when she and Clara came into the room Earny had revived, and begged her mamma on no account to send for him.

Mrs. Dalton at first persisted in doing so; it was so very unusual for Earny to feel faint; indeed, she had never before fainted quite away, that Mrs. Dalton felt sure she must be going to be ill; however, Earny succeeded in assuring her that the feeling of faintness had quite passed away, and Dr. Biggs was not sent for, but Mrs. Dalton was uneasy the whole day, as she could not account for anything so extraordinary happening to Earny.

The time drew on for Clara's return home. Lady Dexham had written to say that she could not spare her any longer, and was coming to fetch her at the end of the following week.

This was sad news to all at the cottage, for Clara had become very dear to them, and Earny's desire



that Clara should become acquainted with and love her mamma, and little sister, had been fulfilled to the utmost.

The change had evidently done Clara much good, she was certainly much stronger, and the colour on her cheek was more healthy, and Mrs. Dalton almost hoped that the improvement might be permanent.

On the day fixed, Lady Dexham came to fetch her home, and was unexpectedly delighted to find her looking so much better.

"It is all owing to your good nursing, dear Mrs. Dalton," said Lady Dexham. "How can I sufficiently thank you for all your kindness to my child?"

"The only recompense we want," replied Mrs. Dalton, "is for you to allow her to come again very soon; we shall all sadly miss her."

Clara went up to Mrs. Dalton, and winding, her arm round her waist, looked up lovingly into her face, and said, "Dear Mrs. Dalton, promise me that you will come to see us at Hurst Park. Mamma," continued she, turning to Lady Dexham, "make her promise; I want it so much."

Lady Dexham wanted no urging, for she had learnt long since from Earny, and more lately from Clara's letters, that Mrs. Dalton was no ordinary acquaintance, and she longed to welcome her to Hurst Park.

Mrs. Dalton could not refuse their united entreaties, and gave a promise of doing so some day.

"I fear Clara has been committing a robbery," said Lady Dexham, "and taken the roses from Earny's cheeks to put them on her own. Dear, you are not looking well," continued she, addressing Earnestine; "you must come back with us, and we will see if our air is as beneficial to you as yours has been to Clara."

"Do," said Clara.

Earny thanked them, but refused, with a heightened colour, and Lady Dexham thinking of Mr. Montravers, did not press her.

Lady Dexham remained only one night, and this she passed at the cottage, sharing Clara's bed; she thought politeness required her to call at the Grange, and she and Clara went together on the afternoon of her arrival, but Mrs. Montravers was not at home, only Grace.

Mrs. Montravers was exceedingly vexed when on her return the same evening she found Lady Dexham's card lying on the table, and heard from Grace that they were to leave early the next morning; she had fully purposed to get Lady Dexham's permission to Clara's paying them a visit as soon as Mr. Montravers returned from London.

Poor Clara's eyes were very red ere the good-byes were said; she clung to Mrs. Dalton's neck, and begged her to remember her promise, and Mrs. Dalton wiped the tears from her eyes, and, with many kisses, said she could not forget it.

## CHAPTER IV.

"It's eight o'clock, ma'am, and breakfast a been a waiting this last ten minutes."

"I am quite ready for it," said Miss Vickers, opening the door in answer to Betty's rap.

It was Sunday morning, and the sun shone brightly in through Miss Vickers's open window, and rested on a little book lying on the table, with a sprig of jasmine by its side.

The book had evidently been but lately read, for though apparently closed, it gaped open at page 20, and enabled one to read the words—"Hints and Prayers for Sunday School Teachers."

Nine o'clock had hitherto been Miss Vickers's breakfast hour on Sundays, but it was to be so no longer, and Betty had but obeyed her mistress's orders when she summoned her on this morning an hour earlier.

"The butter is very good this morning, and Betty made the water boil, I am sure. The tea has quite

a different flavour," thought Miss Vickers, as she helped herself to another cup.

Presently she looked at her watch. "Twenty minutes to nine; I shall be in very good time;" and, ringing the bell to have the breakfast things removed, she hastened up-stairs to put on her bonnet.

Coming down again in a few minutes, she went into the garden, and gathered a few flowers to take with her.

"How bright, and beautiful, and fresh, everything is," said Miss Vickers to herself, as she turned to gaze on the green fields through which she had just passed, and opened the garden-gate of a small cottage at the top of a pretty shady lane.

It was Mary Elstree's cottage, and her daughter was dying, and Miss Vickers had brought a few of her own choicest flowers to lay on the sick girl's pillow, because she liked them better than those that grew in their own garden; and Nora Elstree looked up with a smile as she recognised the voice of the kind lady who had read to her and to others on those pleasant Sunday afternoons, about the things which were such a comfort to her now. She told Miss Vickers again, as she had so many times before, how happy they had made her, and Miss Vickers's heart felt light, and she went on her way again to find new beauties in everything that surrounded her; it seemed strange to her that she should discover them everywhere, in everything;

but it was not really strange, for she carried the secret of happiness in her heart, and she was now bending her steps towards the schools, to take, for the first time, her place as teacher of a class that she had lately received the care of from Mr. Markham, the vicar.

"Here be our new teacher," said a round rosy-faced girl, as Miss Vickers entered the room, and approached her class.

"Aint she a queer un!" exclaimed one.

"What a bonnet!" said a third.

"I likes her," said a fourth; "she comes to see my mother, and gives me little books."

Ere the school hour was over, the strange looking bonnet had been quite forgotten in the kind looks and words of the teacher, and Jessie Browne's confession of "I likes her," was joined in by the whole class.

The text for that morning's sermon was, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might," and as Miss Vickers walked home ruminating upon it, she resolved that the task to-day, voluntarily undertaken, should never be cast aside, unless a stronger duty called upon her to do so.

Nora Elstree's face was the only one absent from her afternoon home-class, causing the one vacant chair to be more plainly noticed, and each girl as her eye fell on it wished that she were as good as the poor sick Nora.

As Miss Vickers laid her head on her pillow that

night, she mentally exclaimed, "I never spent a more happy Sunday."

Such was the way in which Miss Vickers always now commenced the week, and the other six days followed in the spirit of the first. Truly much good had come out of evil, and Dick's adventure on that cold winter's evening had been the means of changing Miss Vickers from the kind-hearted, but gossiping, and, therefore, mischief-making companion, into the still kinder, more loving, earnest, Christian woman. Little had Miss Vickers thought as she despatched her birthday gift to Dick, that it was destined to bring forth such great results.

Betty at first wondered at her mistress, and then came to the conclusion that she should "have been the biggest fool in creation, had she gone off in a huff, as she had once intended doing, from the best, and kindest, and goodest of missusses. A bad thing for Master Dick if she had, who else, she should like to know, would stand in the broiling sun ready to slip a nice jam tart into his hand, every morning as he came from school?"

But Dick, and Betty, and the jam tarts, were soon to part company, for a friend of Mr. Fenton had written to say that he had succeeded in gaining a direct commission for Dick in the Indian army; he was, therefore, by his father's orders, to join him in London immediately, and as soon as his outfit was ready, to sail for Madras.

Dick was delighted; and horrified Minnie with tales of the dreadful things he meant to do when he was a soldier, and she decided that he was an exceedingly cruel, wicked boy, and she hoped he would never come back again.

Mrs. Dalton and Earny could not join in Minnie's wish, for they knew his absence would leave a blank in their home circle, added to which they knew that in a pecuniary way it would be a great loss to them, for Mrs. Dalton's brother had paid her very handsomely for his son's board, and as soon as he left of course the payment would cease. Dick never thought of this, or most probably he would have represented the state of the case in his next letter to his father.

Mrs. Dalton and Earny had many a private conversation respecting the future, and finally decided that they would at once seek for some one to fill Dick's place. Only one week's notice, and Dick had said good-by to his aunt and cousins, and had started for London; he hardly knew whether to laugh or look annoyed, as Miss Vickers, while taking leave of him, slipped a five-pound note into his hand, and at the same time smacked, as he afterwards called it, a large kiss right down on his embryo moustache.

Dick was gone, and no one offered to supply his place. Mrs. Dalton advertised, but received no answer to the advertisement, and the want of the quarterly allowance began to make itself felt.

Earny, as she sat at work one evening, pondered over what could be done, and at last hit upon what she considered a very successful plan. To go out as a governess she knew her mamma would not allow now she was engaged to Mr. Montravers, and she feared he would equally object to her taking pupils, not on his own account, but for his mother's sake, Earny knew *she* would be so horrified at her son's marrying a governess; but Ann could go, and she would take Ann's place and help the cook, that would make a great difference and enable her mamma to have the comforts to which she had been accustomed. She looked at this plan on all sides, and seeing that it would inconvenience no one but herself, resolved to have it put into execution.

"What are you thinking of, mamma dear?" said she, as she noticed the shade of care on Mrs. Dalton's brow; "pounds, shillings, and pence? as usual."

"Yes, dear; I cannot see how we are to manage to keep out of debt, the weekly bills amount to almost double the sum that I have to expend on them, and I thought we had been very economical."

"What do the servants cost, mamma?"

"The two together about as much as you and I and Minnie; they seem to have enormous appetites, but they work hard, and I daresay require more than we do."



"And then wages—Ann's I mean—eight pounds, is it not?"

"Yes, and she wishes to have them raised. I don't know how to refuse her, she is a good servant, but we cannot afford it."

"Let her get another situation, mamma; with such a good character many will be glad to have her and give her good wages."

"Who could we have in her place? I don't know of any I should like."

"We don't want any-one, mamma; let us keep but one."

"But one, dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Dalton, who had never thought of this. "What a good idea, Earny; only cook will never undertake all the work."

"I can help her you know, mamma dear; offer her two pounds extra, and if she will not stay for that, we can get another."

"It really is a good plan, Earny; but poor Ann, what will she say?"

"She will not mind if we get her a nice place. I will ask Grace; I dare say she knows of some one who would like to have her."

"And Minnie's frocks, we shall have to put them out to be made."

"We will see about that, mamma dear. I shall ask Ann to teach me before she leaves. I know she will," said Earny; "I fancy I have rather an aptitude for dressmaking."

Cook and Ann were called in and spoken to on the subject, and it resulted in everything being arranged as Earny had proposed.

Ann was to leave as soon as she could find a place to suit her; and, meantime, she and Earny were much engaged in cutting out and making two little muslin frocks for Minnie, bought purposely for Earny to try her skill on. The first Ann cut out and placed everything in order for Earny, but the second she managed almost entirely herself, and she felt quite as pleased as Minnie, when the child, having been dressed in it, went down to receive her mamma's praises and commendations on the performance.

"Earny, my child," said Mrs. Dalton, kissing Earnestine's bright and glowing face, "you never undertake anything that you do not perform. I hope you will teach Minnie to be like you."

Earny felt very pleased; she had found the stitch, stitch, rather monotonous at first, but she was amply rewarded for it now.

Ann left, and Earny entered upon her new and self-imposed duties, with a heart happy in the knowledge of doing something for those she loved so fondly.

Thus week by week passed, and the expiration of Captain Macclaughton's and of Mr. Montravers's time of probation drew to a close. Earny had not, when she had specified the period of six months

to Mr. Montravers, recollected that this would bring it to the very same week in which Captain Macclaughton was to make his second proposal for Clara.

The accounts of Clara's health were now very cheering; she seemed to have regained new strength and vigour from her visit to Mrs. Dalton and Earny, and Lord and Lady Dexham's hopes were again raised.

Mr. Montravers had been engaged in London ever since the commencement of Clara's visit, but seldom a day passed that he did not find time to write a few lines to Earny.

It was within two days of the expiration of the stated six months when the morning's post brought her two letters, one bearing the London post-mark, the other that of the nearest town to Hurst Park.

She knew, before opening it, what that from London contained—intelligence of his coming to get a day definitely fixed for their marriage; and what could she say to him? undoubtedly he would like it to take place immediately, and if she again refused might he not accuse her of fickleness; nay, unless she gave him some reason, might he not wish to put an end to their engagement; she did not think he would, but it might be so, and could she bear it if he did? She could not tell; she would try to do her duty, but she hardly knew

where that duty lay; for a long time she sat holding the unopened letters in her hand, then she slowly broke the seal and discovered that it was as she had feared. He would be with her soon after the arrival of the six o'clock train on the following evening. "I need not tell you for what purpose, dearest, nor how I long for the time," were the concluding words, and Earny wished she knew not what.

Presently her eye fell on Clara's, still unread, and she took it from the envelope; it was a long letter she saw, but she did not guess its contents or she would have read it more speedily.

After a few inquiries respecting all her friends at the cottage, Clara proceeded to say that she and Captain Macclaughton were now positively engaged, and that the marriage was to take place in about six weeks. "You will not be surprised, darling Earny, I know, for I told you that we should always love each other, and I think our year of waiting has only made us cling the closer to one another. I thought at one time we should never be married, for every one seemed to fancy that I was dying; they did not tell me so, but I guessed it from their looks, and I had been training myself to give him up; but now I am so much better even papa cannot object. Neither he nor mamma like it to take place quite so soon, but Captain Macclaughton pressed it so much that I do not like to

disappoint him after his long time of waiting for me ; he is so good and kind, and says he shall be miserable until I am his own little wife, that what can I do but just as he likes ?” Then followed many incidents of his love and care for her, and an account of how much he had suffered at being parted from her so long, which Clara said she could never have repeated to any one save to Earny, but that she was as a dear sister to her, and knew a little about Captain Macclaughton.

“ Indeed I do,” sighed Earny. “ Oh, Clara dear, what can I do to save you from that false, deceitful man ! If I were but to speak I could separate you now and for ever. I am almost tempted to do so, but it might kill you, and words once spoken can never be recalled. If I could but tell mamma she would help me to find out what I ought to do, but I must not, I cannot. Clara to marry Captain Macclaughton ! it seems to be a sin to allow it, yet there is but one alternative, and that I dare not venture for Clara’s sake, still more than for my own ;” and as Earny could not decide in what way she was called upon to act, she once more took refuge in silence.

Grace also had received a note from her brother telling her that he would be home on the morrow, and she could not forbear going to the cottage to see how Earny felt on the occasion.

There was no need to ask if she had had any

letters that morning, for there they were lying on the table beside her, while she was mechanically employed in mending some of Minnie's clothes.

This was Minnie's lesson hour, but the child's twice-repeated assurance of, "I know all my lessons, Earny," had been entirely disregarded, and she was left to play unheeded.

She started as she saw Grace, and almost fancied that her brother might be with her; her next movement was to thrust the letters into her work-basket, not that she had any objection to Grace's seeing them, but she felt that she could not speak of their contents. Grace noticed it and wondered at it, and also at the strangeness of Earny's manner that morning, so different from what it usually was, that something told her that it argued no good for her brother, yet why it should not she was at a loss to discover. Earny was not generally a very great talker, but now she scarcely gave Grace an opportunity of saying a word; poor girl! she feared what the subject might be if Grace spoke, and therefore did all in her power to prevent her doing so.

Grace did not stay long; she felt what she had never felt before, that she was in the way at the cottage, and soon took her leave; and Earny, for the first time in her life, was glad Grace was gone, she wanted time to think.

She had shown Clara's letter to her mamma. Not Mr. Montravers's; she did not mean to

do that until she had decided on some course of action.

"You are looking very pale this morning, Earny dear," said Mrs. Dalton, as they sat down to breakfast on the following morning. No wonder, for scarcely an hour's sleep had she had that night.

"Am I mamma? I feel rather tired. I dare say a cup of tea will refresh me."

Her mamma gave her a cup; and she said, "Thank you," and then uttered not another word, until her mamma, seeing she had not touched it, nor commenced eating, said, "Earny, my dear, what is the matter with you? You look as if you had the care of the whole world on your shoulders."

"Do I?" said Earny, starting and trying to smile. "I believe I was thinking."

"Not very pleasant thoughts, they seemed, my dear. I suppose they were about Clara and Captain Macclaughton. I am very sorry for the dear child. I really feel tempted to let Lady Dexham know what his real character is. I would if I were sure I should do any good by it, but it is gone too far now, I fear."

"Oh, yes, mamma; it would kill Clara; I feel sure it would. She thinks him such a piece of perfection."

"A hint from you, Earny dear, might perhaps lead to inquiries."

"Indeed, mamma, I could not; it would look like malice, coming from me."

"Malice, dear! Why? What has Captain Macclaughton done to you to make them think that you are actuated by any feelings of that kind?"

"Perhaps malice was a wrong word, mamma; but at the least they would think it very unkind of me, and I could not bear to lose Clara's love."

"If you think it would be better to be silent on the subject, dear, let it be so; you know them all so much better than I do that you ought to be the best judge of what is right."

Was it right! That was the question that Earny wished so much to have solved. Suppose if, in years to come, Clara should be a miserable and neglected wife, might not Mrs. Dalton accuse her of being the cause of it; would it not be better to tell all now? Earny almost thought it would, and yet feared to make the experiment.

The evening came and with it Mr. Montravers. Earny was sitting in her usual seat at the window watching for him; she had told her mamma that he was coming, but did not say for what purpose. The train had arrived, she could easily tell that by the increased number of vehicles flying past, bearing trunks and portmanteaus. He was going to the Grange first, he had told her, therefore he could not be at the cottage in less than half an hour. What a long half hour that seemed, and yet Earny would have lengthened it if she had been able;



thus she sat at the open window, and had for a moment forgotten him as her thoughts flew off to Clara and the pic-nic in the woods; a shadow came across her, and she looked up; her start, and flush of pleasure as she beheld him standing close to her on the soft grass, told him that he was welcome; and was he not really so?

Earny ran to the door, and let him in herself; and as she brought him into the sitting-room in which Mrs. Dalton and tea were waiting for him, he looked first at Earny, and then round on the cheerful aspect of the room, and said, "It was no wonder that Grace considered this a true specimen of a real loving English home."

Earny knew that as soon as tea was over he would ask her to take a walk with him; she was therefore quite prepared when the proposal for it came.

"I will bring her safely back to you to-night," said Mr. Montravers to Mrs. Dalton, as she nodded to them as they passed the window, "but I hope not to have the opportunity of doing so many more times."

He led her off in the same direction that they had taken just that day six months, but it did not look the same then as now, for the trees, at that time bare and leafless, were now rich in luxuriant foliage; then a solitary redbreast hopped about here and there, now the air resounded with the sonorous

warblings of a dozen little songsters, as they whispered their good nights from their leafy dwellings.

Mr. Montravers felt the calmness of the scene, and as they turned into the same pretty lane in which they had walked on that cold wintry afternoon, he thought how suited was everything around to participate in the joy of his heart, as she for whom he had waited so long was now to put an end to all his fears, and promise on some certain day, perhaps in less than a month, to be his very own.

They talked on various subjects, but not on the one that was uppermost in the minds of each, until they had reached the exact spot where they had stood together before, when she had so sadly disappointed him; then he drew her arm from within his own, and, clasping her hand in both his, looked her steadily in the face and whispered, "When? Dearest Earny, say when?"

There was so much earnestness, so much love in the tone, that Earny's eyelids trembled, and, forgetting all her pre-arranged excuses, she burst into tears, and sobbed forth, "only, "Oh, Vernon! I cannot say when. Perhaps never!"

Mr. Montravers stood, as it were, petrified. He saw that Earny was crying, yet it seemed to have no effect on him. Her hand had remained clasped within his own; gradually he let it fall, and no word was spoken; then, as she lifted her streaming

eyes to meet his gaze, he seized it once more, exclaiming, "Earny, Earny, Earnestine Dalton! tell me have you been deceiving me? Do you no longer love me? Did you ever do so?"

There was no evading the question. He held her hand tightly, and looked straight into her eyes, as though he would have read her very soul.

The answer to the first question came first.

"Yes, Vernon, I have deceived you."

A look of indescribable mental pain overshadowed his face. He endeavoured to withdraw his hand, but she retained it.


"One moment, Vernon," she said, and her voice trembled; "that is but the answer to your first question; the others I will answer also, and then your hand is your own. I do love you; have done so ever since I knew you."

There was truth in her tone, and the shadow grew less dark.

"Yet, Earny, you say you have deceived me!"

"Yes; by fixing any definite time to speak of that for which we came here this evening. I merely mentioned that time by way of postponement."

"Why, Earny, if it is as you say, and as I fain would believe, why should any subterfuge be necessary? I would have waited for you, ay, until death, had you given me any reason for it. Why should you wish to have it postponed? I



thought I had satisfied all your objections when first I asked you to fix the time. Tell me if there is any other arisen in your mind. Perhaps I can find a way to get it removed."

Earny sadly shook her head, and Mr. Montravers looked perplexed.

"What is this great thing that can separate us, Earny? Will you tell me? I fancied I heard you pronounce the words, 'Perhaps never.' Is it to be so? Is it your wish?" he asked as his very frame shook with agitation. "Oh, Earny! there is nothing that I would not do to render you happy, even if it were," the words came very slowly, "to—give—you—up."

"That must be as you like," said Earny, as she secretly pressed her arm against her heart to stop its painful throbbing. "I have said all I dare say. I must leave you to decide."

"You will not tell me what all this mystery is? You will give me no reason?" asked Mr. Montravers almost beseechingly?

"I dare not."

"Oh, Earny! answer me this one question, and I will ask no more. Answer me truly, the heavens above being your witness. Is it against your wish that I should go on loving, waiting for you still?" His life seemed as if it were to hang on the words, as he saw her lips slightly open.

A soft, faint, but earnest "No," came from out

them, and her hand was again seized and tightly pressed in his.

"My own! still my own!" he murmured. "Earny, you laid on my heart a load which well nigh crushed it; but you have eased it now. Perchance some day you will remove it altogether."


Earny thought it might be a long time first. She could not tell, and resolved to wait patiently.

Mr. Montravers spent the remainder of the evening at the cottage, and he and Earny tried to speak and act as usual; but they could not so soon shake off the effects of a conversation that had caused them both so much pain. Mrs. Dalton could not help noticing that something unusual had happened, and ventured to remark, as she wished Earny good night, that she hoped there was nothing wrong with Mr. Montravers.

"Oh, no, mamma," replied Earny, as she looked up, with her accustomed smile; "he is ever the same;" and Mrs. Dalton accused herself of being fanciful.

Mrs. Montravers knew for what purpose her son had returned from London, and was therefore greatly surprised as she noticed his sad and subdued air, as she entered the drawing-room, at the Grange, that same evening, on his return from the cottage.

"What a beautiful evening it is," remarked Grace, more by way of saying something than caring aught about the weather.



"Is it?" said her brother, and throwing himself on the nearest lounge, he took up a book lying near it, and commenced reading.

Grace saw that something was wrong. What could it be? Surely he and Earny had not quarrelled. Yet she had never seen him look so dispirited since that first morning of his arrival, when he thought that Miss Dalton was another man's wife.

Mrs. Montravers felt in better spirits than she had for many months. She trusted that her son had, at last, found out Miss Dalton in her true character. The idea of her having refused him never entered her head. She knew Earny would only be too glad to get such an opportunity of settling; so she sat for some time wondering what could have happened; but as she could find no clue to it, ventured a remark,

"How is Miss Dalton, to-night, Vernon? I think you told me you were going there."

The inquiry was such an unusual thing as coming from his mother, that Mr. Montravers's look brightened, and a cheerful "Quite well, I thank you," followed.

Mrs. Montravers felt puzzled. He was not angry with Earnestine Dalton, that was clear. His eyes sparkled even at the mention of her name. She was determined to find out what was the matter with him.

"I believe you had a particular purpose in going to see her to-night," said she at length, looking at him fixedly. "May we be informed when the event is to take place. It is right we should be prepared."

"I do not know, mother. Miss Dalton wishes to have it delayed. The time at present is very uncertain."

"And she allowed you to travel all the way from London on a fool's errand? Very creditable, indeed! May I ask her reason for wishing to have it postponed?"

"She has not given me one, mother; but as she wishes it, I am content to wait."

"Absurd nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Montravers, boiling over with indignation, to think of that poverty-stricken girl giving herself the airs of a duchess. "I have no patience with you, Vernon. Here have you been dancing attendance on that girl for, I can't tell how long, and then, when you wish to marry her, more's the pity, she pretends she does not want you. It is nothing but acting a falsehood. You had better give her up altogether."

Mr. Montravers had risen from the sofa during this speech of his mother, and now stood close by her chair. As she stopped for a moment to recover her breath, he laid his hand on her shoulder, and in a kind, but firm, voice said—

"Mother; you must never speak so again. Miss Dalton is to be my wife one day, and, as such, your

daughter, or," he added, more slowly, "no one else ever shall."

Mrs. Montravers was about to make some satirical reply, but a servant coming in to remove the tea-cups, the conversation was interrupted, and all parties thought it better not to renew it.



## CHAPTER V.

PREPARATIONS were going on vigorously at Hurst Park, the *trousseau* was ordered, and all the village school children were busily employed in trying to work something as wedding presents for their sweet and gentle young lady.

Jarvis had left some time ago; she said she saw that Miss Molesworth no longer valued her services as she had formerly done, and therefore she preferred seeking an engagement ("situation" was far too low a word for Jarvis), where she should be held in proper estimation, so she was gone, and Sarah Tibs, Widow Green's neighbour and attendant, had taken her place.

Captain Macclaughton was there constantly; indeed, it was with difficulty that Lord and Lady Dexham could keep her a day to themselves.

"He will so soon have you all to himself, darling," said Lady Dexham to Clara, one morning when they saw Captain Macclaughton striding up to the

house to carry her off for two or three hours, "that he ought not to be so selfish now. I think I shall go and tell him so."

"He is only selfish in his love, mamma dear," replied Clara, looking up into her mother's face with her clear trusting eyes; "but I will stay with you to-day. Will you go and tell him so?"

"Not if you would rather not, dear," said Lady Dexham, relenting of her threat.

"But I would rather, mamma dear, as you say I shall be with you such a short time now, and you will be sorry to part with me, though it will not make you so unhappy as that other parting that you thought was coming, will it mamma?"

"I cannot bear the thought of it in any way, my child; yet if it makes you happy, I will try to like it."

"And you and papa will come, and stay with us, and then it will be quite like home again. Will it not?"

"Yes, dear, I hope so; it will seem a long time before you return from the Continent."

"The time will soon pass away, and Earny will come and stay with you part of the time, I know, mamma, if I ask her. How kind she has always been to me; has she not? I wonder when she will be married. Mrs. Dalton will miss her as much as you will me; but she has Minnie left.

"And I have only you," and Lady Dexham

wiped away the tears that would intrude themselves whenever she thought of parting with her daughter.

"I suppose you will have a letter this morning, telling you all about Clara's arrangements," said Mrs. Dalton, looking out of the window to see if she could catch a glimpse of the postman, about a week after the above conversation between Lady Dexham and Clara.

"Yes, I suppose so," replied Earny, "or I shall scarcely have time to get my dress ready. Have you quite decided, mamma, on not accepting Lady Dexham's invitation?"

"Yes, quite dear; it is so long since I moved in such gay scenes, that I am sure it would be too much for me, and you will have Mr. Montravers to keep you company."

"I know Clara wishes it, mamma dearest, and you promised to go some day."

"Yes, dear, I know she does, and that some day may come yet; when they return from Switzerland, and have settled down quietly, perhaps."

That some day was rather nearer than Mrs. Dalton expected.

Earny did not press it further; she longed to remain at home herself, but this she knew no one would hear of.

Mr. Montravers had not returned to London, and he and Earny were constantly together; they walked and rode as before, only the one subject

was never named; he saw that Earny avoided it, therefore it was never alluded to by him.

This morning he was pacing up and down his study with rapid strides, his hands firmly pressed over his temples; then he threw himself into a chair and gave himself up to deep thought. It did not last long, however, for Grace came and stood silently beside him; she longed to say something to comfort him, yet knew not how.

Presently, he looked up, and said in a hollow voice, "What is it, Grace?"

"Do not believe anything about it, Vernon; it is all a made-up story; I am sure it is."

"I can't believe it, Grace; she is truth itself; yet I have told you that she deceived me once. Why this delay, this mystery? Does it not seem to you that there is some foundation for the report?"

"No, Vernon; no foundation for that report; there is some mystery, I allow, with regard to Earny's wishing to have it postponed, but whatever it may be, of one thing I am certain, that it has not withdrawn her love from you."

"Oh, Grace, would that I were sure of it!"

"Make yourself sure of it, Vernon; go to her; ask her for an explanation of that night's proceedings—if indeed it were she—and you will find it nought but an abominable scandal."

"But Jarvis saw her, and Jarvis told Nannette."

"It was very wrong of Nannette to listen to such

nonsense. Vernon, will you go and ask her about it, or shall I?"

"What can I say?"

"Go to her and say that you have heard a report which you do not believe, nor I either, and that I—say *I* if you like—wish to have her authority for contradicting it."

"It may not be true, Grace, and I will go; if it is, I start by the first train for London; you can send my luggage to-morrow."

She ran after him ere he reached the garden-gate, and catching him by the arm, said, "No, Vernon, that would not be kind; you must tell me all about it first," and he promised to return.

Grace went back to the breakfast-room in no pleased humour with her sister Nannette for having caused her brother so much pain, through a piece of servants' gossip, which she had picked up in her visit to Paris.

Nannette had left school at the beginning of the Midsummer vacation, and was deep in the delights of having no more lessons to prepare, when a friend of Mrs. Montravers, who was going to spend a few weeks in Paris, offered to take her with her. Nannette was delighted, and it was while travelling with her that they had fallen in with a family honoured by having Miss Jarvis for their maid. The Honourable Miss Eldon and Nannette were much together, and thus it was that one day reading

aloud the announcement of a marriage that was on the *tapis* in high life, which appeared in one of the Paris papers, Miss Jarvis had enlightened them respecting what she knew of the parties, leading them to believe that Miss Dalton had used her endeavours to withdraw Captain Macclaughton's affections from Miss Molesworth to herself, and dwelling especially upon that evening's walk, when she had stood near and watched them as they returned together from Widow Green's cottage.

Nannette, when she came home, mentioned it to her mother, and she, of course, only too glad of proving her opinion of Earny to be correct, repeated it to her son, with many remarks which served only to augment the flame of jealousy already kindled within his own breast.

Had it not been for Grace, he would probably have rushed off, without ever seeking an explanation, but her sisterly love guarded him, and led him to follow the right path.

Mrs. Dalton having watched for some time at the window, at last saw the postman pass without bringing the expected letter.

"It will be sure to come to-morrow," she said, turning to Earnestine. "I should like a walk this morning. I think I will go and ask Miss Williams if she will be able to make your dress next week. Minnie can come with me."

Minnie was practising her scales, and had no objec-

tion to leave them for a walk with her mamma, provided Earny did not mind.

Earny gave the desired permission, and they started together, thus leaving her alone.

She was busily employed in dusting the drawing-room, when she heard Mr. Montravers's well known rap at the hall-door. The cook happening to be close at hand, she ushered him in, before Earny had time to put away her dusting apparatus, or to remove the large apron in which she always performed her usual housemaid's operations. She tried to untie the string which had got into a knot, but not being able to do so, looked up at him with a smile and an excuse for his finding her in such, she feared he would think, unseemly costume.

The excuse was not uttered, and the smile died away as she saw the expression on Mr. Montravers's face. Something was the matter. She saw it in an instant. His face was ghastly white; the colour even had forsaken his lips, and he tottered into a seat.

She could not ask him what it was. She felt too frightened for that; but sinking into a chair opposite, sat waiting for him to speak.

"Earny," he said at length, trying to steady his voice, that she might not see how agitated he was; "I have come this morning to ask you for an explanation of something—of some report I have heard. Will you give it me, dearest? I do not, I cannot,

believe it; but I want to hear the denial of it from your own lips." He stopped, and, with a face rivaling his own in whiteness, she stammered forth, "What is it about?"

He fixed his eye steadily on her for a moment, and then said slowly,

"About you and Captain Macclaughton."

Her eye fell beneath his gaze, and a crimson flush rose even to the roots of her hair, as he pronounced the last name. Was not this a confirmation of all his younger sister had said? He was losing his trust in Earnestine.

"Earny; Miss Dalton;" he almost shrieked the words, "tell me, did he walk home with you one evening—I may say night—when you were at Hurst Park; and did you cling to his arm; and did he press your hand?"

"It is true," she said. The words were very faint, but he caught them.

"Then, Earnestine Dalton"—his tone expressed no passion, only pain, exquisite pain—"you have been false to me. You, whom I thought the soul of honour; you, whom I trusted with my whole heart! Oh, Earny! the thought of it is more than I can bear."

"I have not been false to you," she said. The head was bent very low, but the words were uttered in a higher key than the former ones.

"Not false!" exclaimed Mr. Montravers. "Not



false, to pretend you cared for me, while you loved another! I do not say do you, but did you love that man?"

Earny shuddered. She was beginning to comprehend his meaning; and pain, acuter than she had ever felt—more acute than any she had ever supposed it possible to feel—arose in her heart as she distinctly and firmly pronounced the word "Never."

"Do you wish our engagement to be broken off?"

The head was no longer bent down, but raised even to a level with his own, and her eye looked steadily into his as she said,

"Yes, certainly; as you do not trust me, it must be so. I release you. You are free."

She rose from her seat and was about to leave the room; but he stepped before her and barred her progress.

"Allow me to pass," was all she could trust herself to say.

"No, Earnestine; not until you have pardoned me for all I have said and done this morning. Oh, stay," he cried beseechingly as she made another movement towards the door. "I have wronged you; insulted you; deeply grieved you; but it was my love for you that drove me to it. I was jealous; I was mad; I told you I did not believe it; and then I acted as if I did. Say that you forgive me. I will not accept a release from your hands. I am not free; I cannot give you up. I have thought

of you ; have dreamt of you so long, I cannot part from you now. Earny, will you forgive me ? ”

He had spoken so vehemently that Earnestine was quite overpowered. She tried to speak, but no sound came.

“ I cannot let you go until you have. Earny, Earny ; is it past forgiveness ? I almost fear it is. I ought not to hope for it.”

Earny could not bear this. She had borne up while his words and tone expressed command and implications ; but now when there was nought but humble entreaty and penitence, her pride gave way, and, placing her hand over her eyes, she burst into a flood of tears.

She did not move away from him as he drew near and took her hand. He pressed it tightly, and he fancied he felt a slight pressure in return. Thus they stood for some minutes ; and the hand grew cold, and the fingers stiffened in Mr. Montravers’s warm grasp. Earnestine had fainted.

“ I have killed her ! ” was all he said, and lifting her into the nearest chair, he rang the bell violently. The cook answered it instantly ; and, as she saw Earny lying back pale and motionless, exclaimed—“ Another of these attacks. How did it come on, sir ? But there, there was no accounting for the last.”

She waited for no reply ; but hastened off in search of something with which to bathe Earny’s temples. In a minute she was back again.

Slowly Earnestine revived; but as soon as she could stand, cook advised her going up-stairs and lying down on the bed; and she promised to do so. As the cook left the room, Mr. Montravers turned to Earny, and said, "Earny, I have been very wicked. Will you try to forget—to blot out of remembrance the heinous fault I have this day committed, and let me be to you as I have been? I am asking a great boon, I know—but will you trust me?"

And Earny could only say "Yes." Then as she turned to leave the room, she came back to Mr. Montravers, and said in a soft tremulous tone,

"Vernon, if ever you should hear anything of me—anything that will perhaps account to you in your own mind for my wishing to delay the fulfilment of your hopes, remember that then is the time that I shall desire to have them fulfilled; remember this, it may be a comfort to you," and she glided from the room.

Ere Mrs. Dalton returned, Earny had washed away all traces of her tears. She still looked pale; but this was accounted for by the cook's explaining how she had had another of them "nasty attacks;" and Mrs. Dalton said she would have some advice for Earny—there must be some reason for them; but Earny persuaded her not to do so, promising to submit to having Dr. Biggs called in if she ever had another.

Grace was waiting for her brother. She had waited so long that she almost feared he had started for London. At last he came, and Grace heard all. How cruelly he had spoken; how gentle Earny had been; and how he had almost killed her; and then that she had forgiven him, the "impossible thing now, Grace, will be to forgive myself;" and Grace thought so too. "Dear Earny," she said, "I believe I love her quite as much as you do."

Mrs. Montravers and Nannette were informed that Earny had given Mr. Montravers all the explanation he needed.

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## CHAPTER VI.

*"Is it not nearly post time, mamma dear? I wonder if Clara's promised letter will come to-day?"*

*"It is not too late for him yet, dear; I daresay it will. Clara will be sure not to disappoint you, if she can help it. Perhaps Captain Macclaughton came in, and prevented her writing to you on Tuesday."*

"Perhaps so," said Earny, as she languidly laid herself down on the sofa. "It is very warm. Don't you think so, mamma?"

"Rather dear; but it does not affect me in the same way it does you. I suppose it is from my having lived so long in India. You ought to take some tonic, Earny; I am sure you are not so strong as you were."

"I think it does make me feel very tired; at least, I am this morning."

The previous day's excitement had been too much for Earny, and a night of feverish troubled sleep had left her prostrate, both in mind and body.

"I have been getting quite uncomfortable about you lately, dearest; I do not like those fainting fits. I wish you would agree to my calling in Dr. Biggs."

"He would not do me any good, dear mamma—I mean there is no occasion for his trying," replied Earny, sitting up, and trying to shake off her apathy.

"I must have my own way, if you do not look better in a day or two, or," continued Mrs. Dalton with a smile, "I must get some one else to use his authority."

Earny, of course, knew to whom her mamma alluded, and the remembrance of her last interview with him, and all his painful insinuations, flashed so vividly through her mind, that for a moment her head grew dizzy, everything swam before her eyes, and had it not been for her mamma's presence, she would most probably have fainted.

But her mamma was there, and Dr. Biggs was looming in the distance, therefore she conquered the feeling, and rubbed a little colour into her cheeks; "those medical men were very wise sometimes, and made discoveries which no one else ever thought of."

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for cook, and no one saw the postman coming, nor knew he was near, until the double knock sounded on the street-door.

"There is your letter," exclaimed Minnie, running to fetch it, "to tell about the wedding. I'll bring it, Earny."

"I don't think it is for you," said the child, as she re-entered the room, and Earny held out her hand to receive it. "I think it is written Mrs. M R S; is not that for you, mamma?"

Earny took it from her hand and passed it to her mamma. "No; it is not for me," she said. "It is very strange; why does not Clara write?"

"Who can this be from? I do not know the writing," said Mrs. Dalton, examining the envelope instead of opening it.

Earny was thinking of Clara, and scarcely heard her mamma's question, but raising her eyes to speak to Minnie she saw Mrs. Dalton break the seal, and in an instant the second line fell upon her ear—"Clara is dying." It was from Reginal, and ran thus:—

"Dear Madam,

"Clara is dying. Will you and Miss Dalton be so very kind as to come to Hurst Park immediately? My dearest sister hopes you will not disappoint her; she longs to see you once more. I know you will come if you can. My mother begs you will excuse her writing to you herself, as she

is so much engaged with darling Clara. The carriage shall wait the arrival of each train at the station until we either see or hear from you. Pray excuse more,

“From, Madam,

Yours very truly,

“REG. MOLESWORTH.

“Hurst Park, Wednesday morning.”

“Oh! mamma, mamma,” burst from Earny’s lips.

“Poor, dear, darling Clara! Let us go to her at once.”

“Yes, dear, at once,” said Mrs. Dalton, starting up; “we have not a moment to lose.”

There was no time for idle conjecture respecting how or when Clara had been taken worse; everything was bustle and confusion until Mrs. Dalton and Earny, with one small portmanteau, hastily packed by cook while they were dressing, were safely deposited in the train which was to convey them to Hurst Park.

Earny had not seen Mr. Montravers since the previous evening, and she feared he would think it unkind of her to go away without allowing him the chance of wishing her good-by. So, while her mamma was giving a few necessary household directions to the cook, she managed to write him a few lines of explanation, asking him to take care of Minnie for her during their absence. She put in this request knowing how happy he would be in

having some assurance of her forgiveness, and then desired Minnie to be sure to give him the note the instant he called.

Minnie promised to do so, and said she would try to be a very good little girl while they were away.

"And don't cry so very much, sister Earny dear," continued the child, wiping the tears from her sister's cheek. "Perhaps Miss Molesworth will get better. She did before, you know."

"Minnie, you must send her a kiss; a great many. Would you not like to do so?"

"Oh, yes, Earny, and lots of love. You know I am her little sister."

"What do you mean?" asked Earny, suddenly stopping in putting on her gloves.

"Don't you remember, Earny, that when she was here I promised to be her little sister as well as yours? Have you forgotten?"

"I had, dear, but I remember now;" and giving little Minnie another kiss, she jumped into the fly with her mamma.

Once seated in the train there was leisure enough for thinking; and sad, very sad, were Earny's thoughts, for she dearly loved Clara, and the idea of losing her by death was almost more than she could bear. Yet ever and anon a feeling of gladness would arise in her heart, in some degree to counterbalance her deep, deep sorrow — gladness

that she had never by word or deed done aught to mar the expected happiness of Clara's young life. Had she interfered, Clara's trust in Captain Macclaughton would have been shaken; and he, Earny felt sure, would have no longer cared more for her than for any other pretty toy that crossed his path; and then, perchance, it might have been thought that she had been the cause of hastening Clara to an early grave. Oh! it was better, far better as it was; "but oh! Clara, my clinging, trustful sister, would that you could be spared to us for a few more years!" sighed poor Earny, as the tears flowed afresh from her already swollen eyes. She never thought then of her own unwavering resolve, that while Clara lived she would never be the wife of Mr. Vernon Montravers.

"This change must have come on very suddenly," said Mrs. Dalton, interrupting the train of Earny's thoughts; "the last accounts were so very cheering."

"Yes, mamma; every letter said how much stronger and better she was becoming; so different from what we expected, that it makes it so much harder to bear now. Poor Lord and Lady Dexham! it will be a dreadful blow to them."

"That it will, my child, and to many others also. Even I, who knew her for so short a time, love her very, very dearly; and you, Earny, and Lotte, and Mr. Molesworth; it is very sad for you all."

"For Lotte especially," said Earny. "How she

must long to be with her. I wonder if Clara has seen the little twins. They are a week old to-day."

"Only a week," said Mrs. Dalton. "Poor little dears!" And her thoughts flew off to a little grave so many, many miles away, in which her own twin boys had been laid.

The carriage was waiting for them at the station, and Reginald came forward to hand them in. The sight of Earny, his dying sister's chosen friend, so overcame him that he could scarcely speak, and Mrs. Dalton feared that all was over.

"How is she?" she ventured to ask, as he seated himself in the carriage opposite them.

"There has been no change since yesterday," he said. "Oh, Mrs. Dalton!" he continued, "it is very kind of you to come. She longs so much to see you. Each time any one has entered her room this morning, she has opened her eyes and asked if it were Earny."

"What made her so ill?" asked Earny, almost fearing what the answer might be.

"Did I not tell you in my letter? Oh! I remember. I ought to have done so, but I was afraid of losing the post. It was on last Tuesday, she had been taking a walk with Captain Macclaughton, and came in looking so bright and happy, when, just as she was leaving the room to change her walking dress, she was seized with a sudden faintness, and saying, 'Oh, mamma!' fell forward into my arms,

at the same moment as a stream of blood gushed out of her mouth. We were all dreadfully frightened, and telegraphed off at once for Dr. Bird. He came immediately he received the message; but, in the meantime, our village doctor had ordered her to bed and applied ice to her chest, which had been effectual in stopping the hæmorrhage. Since then it has not returned; but Dr. Bird says there is no hope of her recovering. He tells us that her apparent restoration to health was but the deceitfulness of a disease which has been undermining her constitution for years. Even had she not ruptured this blood vessel, he does not think she could have lived many months, as both lungs are greatly diseased."

"Does she know that she is so ill?" asked Earny.

"Yes, I think so; but she is kept very quiet, and not allowed to talk. Mr. Wilnot was with her to-day; and as he left she whispered, 'You will come again soon.'"

"And Lady Dexham, your mother, how is she?" asked Mrs. Dalton.

"Much better than I could have expected," replied Reginal. "Indeed, I do not think she realizes how very ill Clara is. It will make it all the worse for her when she is obliged to do so."

"Much worse," said Mrs. Dalton. "I ought to have inquired for your little ones! and Mrs. Moles-

worth. I am sure you will excuse my not having done so before."

"Thank you; they are all going on very well; but Lotte, I fear, is fretting very much at being kept from Clara's side."

"It is quite natural she should. I hope she may be enabled to see her once more."

"I trust so too; but Dr. Bird says he dares not give us any hope beyond a week."

"This is Hurst Park, mamma," said Earny, as they entered the avenue; and none of them spoke again until the carriage drew up at the long flight of steps leading to the principal entrance, then Reginald said, "If you will follow me into the drawing-room, I will leave you there and bring my mother to you."

But Lord and Lady Dexham had heard the carriage wheels—the one from the library, the other from Clara's room; and as Mrs. Dalton and Earny entered the hall, they were both there to meet them.

"This is very kind of you," said Lady Dexham, as she returned Mrs. Dalton's warm grasp of sympathy; and Lord Dexham did, as he had never done before, imprinted a kiss on Earny's cheek, as he drew her arm within his and led her into the drawing-room.

They each thought, though no one said it, how different were the circumstances which had led to

Mrs. Dalton's and Earny's visit from what had been intended; and a sad gloom fell upon them all.

Lady Dexham herself took them to their rooms, and then left them to go to Clara, saying, as she did so, "Earny you are quite at home here. Will you take my place and make your mamma equally so?"

A strange feeling stole over Earny as Lady Dexham pronounced these words, and laying her head on her mamma's shoulder, they both wept together.

"This is a beautiful place," said Mrs. Dalton, as she approached the window, and looked out on the beautiful view that it commanded. "What a lovely spot!"

"Yes, mamma; is it not?" said Earny, "and yet it does not keep away trouble. Do you see those chimneys there to the right, among the trees? That is where Lotte lives. I must go and see her to-morrow."

At any other time how delighted would Earny have been to point out to her mamma all the beauties by which Hurst Park was surrounded; but now how could they think of aught but Clara?

Sarah Tibs came to attend to their unpacking, and after a few inquiries respecting her mother's health, Earny took her mamma down stairs.

Lord Dexham and his son were there alone; but presently Lady Dexham came in, and said that



Clara had again asked for Earny. "Would she come to her?"

There was a painful fluttering at Earny's heart as Lady Dexham opened the door that led into Clara's room, and she paused for one moment on the threshold, as if to gather strength for what might follow.

The curtains were drawn aside, and the reflected rays of the declining sun fell softly on Clara's pillow, and then glanced across her brow as Earny approached the bed.

"How beautiful!" burst from her lips; and, as Clara heard them in those well-known tones, she opened her eyes and, stretching out her arms, clasped Earny's neck, saying, in a changed but still gentle voice, "Earny darling! I thought I should never see you more."

Earny could not speak—tears choked her utterance, but kiss after kiss vibrated from that locked embrace, until Lady Dexham, fearful of the effects of such excitement on Clara's weak frame, gently laid her hand on Earny's shoulder, and said,

"We must be very careful, or Dr. Bird will scold us when he comes to-night."

"It does not hurt me, mamma; please don't send her away," said Clara. "I want her to come and sit by my side; and you, too, mamma. I feel better to-night."

And Earny brought a chair, and seated herself as

Clara wished, clasping the thin, small, white hand in hers, until, soothed as it were by Earny's presence, she fell into a calm refreshing sleep.

Lady Dexham went down to Mrs. Dalton, and Earny still retained her place by Clara's side. As she lay thus, Earny had full opportunity of marking the change which had taken place in her since last they parted.

"How could they say she looked stronger?" thought Earny, as she marked the sunken eyelids, the transparent forehead in which each vein was clearly visible, the long taper fingers. She did not know how greatly the last three days had helped to increase all these. There was such a look of death in her face that once or twice Earny bent forward to assure herself that she indeed only slept. It was a great relief to her when, after nearly an hour's sleep, Clara opened her eyes, and looked up in astonishment to find Earny bending over her.

"Is that really you, Earny? I had forgotten you were here. Have I been asleep?"

"Yes, darling; such a long time. Has it done you good?"

"I think it has, for the present. You know it is only for the present, don't you, Earny? Have they told you?"

"They told me you were very ill, dearest," replied Earny, trying to drive back the fast-falling tears."

"But did they not tell you that I am dying? I see you know it, Earny. Do not cry so, dear; you need not be afraid to talk to me about it; I do not mind it now."

"Clara, dear dear Clara! how can we part from you?"

"Are you so very sorry, Earny? You do not think it is such a dreadful thing to die, do you? You used to tell me it was not. I could not believe you then, but I do now."

"And you are not afraid now, Clara?"

"Oh, no, dear! I wish I could take you all with me, and then I should be quite happy. I am happy now, for you will all come some day, I hope. I know *you* will, Earny. I wish I had been more like you; I have been trying so much lately, but I could not succeed. I have always been selfish and indolent. I don't think I have been deceitful, yet that old gipsy woman is always coming to me in my dreams, and taunting me with pretending to be what I am not."

"Dearest Clara, why will you let the silly words of a still sillier old woman mar your peace of mind? Clara, I have known you long; I know you well; you are not deceitful. Will you not believe me?"

"I will try, Earny; you never deceived me; you will not do so now, and I will think no more about it."

She lay quite still for a few minutes, thinking, it

seemed, calm, peaceful thoughts, and then turning to Earny, asked if Nora Elstree were dead.

"Yes, dear; she died nearly a month ago. She was very, very happy."

"I know she was," said Clara. "Do you remember Miss Vickers taking me to see her? I did not like to go at first, but I was so glad afterwards. I had always thought it such a dreadful thing to die, until I saw how happy she looked, and heard her say such beautiful things about the home to which she said she was going, and I wondered how she could call it a home; and then I listened while Miss Vickers read to her about the mansions in the skies, and she told Miss Vickers that one of them was prepared for her; and oh! Earny, then I wished that I had one also, and I thought I would try to get one. At first I did not know how; but as I hunted and hunted to find out some of the beautiful verses that I had heard poor Nora repeat I found the way was made quite plain; and now, Earny, in a few days my mansion will be quite ready for me. I hope it will be near poor Nora's; I should like to see her there, and you—all of you; yes, you must *all* come."

She laid great stress on the *all*, and Earny thought she might be thinking of Captain Macclaughton, but as she had not mentioned his name, Earny was careful to avoid all allusion to the subject.

Again she lay very still and quiet, and then asked,

“Earny dear, is not your mamma come?”

“Yes, dearest; but she was afraid of tiring you if we both came up together, and thought she had better wait until to-morrow. Don’t you think it would be the better plan? I am afraid I have let you talk too much,” said Earny, as she noticed how faint Clara’s voice had become.

“Very well, dear, if you all think so; I daresay you know what is best.”

Just then Sarah Tibs came in a second time to see if Miss Molesworth was awake, and finding such was the case, said her ladyship would be glad to see Miss Dalton in the dining-room, as dinner had been waiting some time.

“Thank you for sitting with me so long,” said Clara, as Earny kissed her before leaving the room. “Please come and say ‘Good night,’ before you go to bed.”

They were all seated at the table when Earny entered, and for a moment she did not perceive that Captain Macclaughton was present; but as she was about to take the vacant chair, he rose from his seat and offered her his hand.

She would have given pounds could she have subdued the blush that rose to her cheek as she placed her hand in his, but, conscious that she could not, it only made her colour assume a deeper hue.

Perhaps he did not notice it; she hoped not, yet something told her that he did.

Few words were spoken during dinner, for no one felt capable of keeping up the conversation.

Captain Macclaughton looked the very picture of woe, and sigh after sigh escaped him each time that any one pronounced Clara's name. Even Mrs. Dalton looked as if she pitied him; and indeed a thought did arise in her mind whether all she had heard of him could be true.

The next day Clara seemed much better, and requested to be allowed to lie on the couch by the window; she wanted again to feel the fresh pure air blowing over her, but Lady Dexham said they must wait to hear what Dr. Bird thought about it; he was expected at twelve, and in the meantime would she not like to see Mrs. Dalton?

"Oh, yes," said Clara; "dear Mrs. Dalton, I long to see her; she was very kind to me."

"She has been waiting to come to you ever since breakfast; shall I ask her to come now?"

"If you please, mamma dear; but give me another kiss first; you are my own mamma, and you must not stay long away."

Lady Dexham bent over her and held her in a long embrace, and then left her in Sarah Tibs's charge while she went in search of Mrs. Dalton.

They had not hired a nurse for Clara, for Sarah Tibs had rebelled against such a proposition,

begging to be allowed to do all that was required for her own young mistress; and Lady Dexham preferred sharing the office with her than with a stranger who might perhaps be one whom Clara might not like. She would not say so, that, Lady Dexham knew, for she was so gentle and submissive, so loving and fearful of giving trouble, that Sarah Tibs said it was more like nursing an angel than aught else.

Clara was very glad to see Mrs. Dalton, and they had a little quiet conversation together, something like what she and Earny had had, and then Dr. Bird came and said she might lie on the sofa whenever she liked, so she was wrapped in her pretty pink dressing-gown and placed by the open window, and soon afterwards her papa came up to pay his morning visit, and then Captain Macclaughton and Reginal, for a few minutes only, and but one at a time, for Clara could not bear too much talking.

Poor Lord Dexham! it was almost more than he could bear to sit beside his daughter, and listen to her loving speeches, without the power of doing anything to stay her departure from him; and she would draw down his head as tear after tear rolled down his cheeks, and wipe them away with her own hand, begging him not to cry so much for her, she was only his idle, lazy child, that had often given him a great deal of trouble; and this only made the tears flow faster, and

Lord Dexham felt that his heart was like to break.

Reginal's grief was something like his father's, but Captain Macclaughton's was of a far different kind, and Lady Dexham almost dreaded to let him see her daughter, fearing what effect it might have on her.

But he claimed it as a right, saying, was she not almost his wife; it was cruelty to separate them now; he must see her; and then, when in her presence, he would pace the room with vehement gestures, telling her that if she died he must die also; he should be miserable—should never know another happy moment; and then Clara would try to reconcile him by the prospect of meeting in another land. This, however, was not what he wanted; he said, he must have her now; it was cruel of her to die and leave him all alone; and Clara would weep quiet tears, and wish he did not love her so much.

Each day Clara was laid on the couch by the open window, and each day she seemed better able to bear it. Dr. Bird was surprised, he had not expected her strength would have so far revived.

She was lying thus one morning when Earny came into the room; she had just returned from a visit to Lotte and was bringing her a message.

"Will you come and sit by me," said Clara, as



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She was lying thus one morning when Earny came into the room; she had just returned from a visit to Lotte and was bringing her a message.

"Will you come and sit by me," said Clara, as

soon as she had delivered it; "I want to talk to you a little."

Earny removed her hat and placed herself on a low stool by Clara's couch. "What is it, dear?" she said.

"It is about yourself, Earny. I want you to tell me why you and Mr. Montravers have not been married before?"

Earny waited as if thinking that Clara had not finished her sentence.

"When are you going to be, Earny?"

"Dearest Clara, how can I think about such things at a time like this?"

"That is why I want to talk to you about it, Earny. I am afraid that, when I am gone, you will think you ought to wait—I mean, that you will not like to be married, perhaps, for a year, because we have been like sisters to each other; but I would rather, Earny, that you did not let my death make any difference. If I had lived, nothing would have made me happier than to see you happy; and why should it not be the same when I am dead? You must promise not to wait, Earny."

"We have never fixed any time, Clara dear."

"Then let it be in three months, Earny; I am sure Mr. Montravers will be very glad."

"Oh, not so soon as that, dearest Clara; it cannot be; I could not bear it."

"Then four months, Earny. Do not let it be longer."

"Why, darling, are you so anxious that we should be married?"

"Because, dear, I know it will make you both happy; and if it is postponed—who can tell—perhaps it will never take place."

It was evident she was thinking of herself and Captain Macclaughton, for instead of continuing the subject with regard to Earny, she waited a few minutes, and then said, "You did not expect to come to a house of mourning, did you Earny?"

"It would have been a sad house any time, deary, when you had gone from it," said Earny, evading a direct reply.

"Only for a little while; and I told mamma that I would ask you to stay with her for a few days after I was gone; and so you will now, will you not, Earny? for she will have no one left to comfort her."

Earny managed to articulate a promise, and Clara continued:

"And there is another thing, Earny, I wanted to say, I hope you will not mind my doing so; you know there are all my things ready for me—my wedding things—and as I shall never want them, I should like you to have them. I am much smaller than you, but I think they could be altered;

the skirt of my dress was cut so much too long, that there is a large piece turned down at the top."

Earny could bear it no longer, and throwing her arms round Clara's neck, begged her to say no more, or she was sure her heart would break.

"I should like to finish, Earny; if you would not mind listening. I meant to tell Lotte all this, but she cannot come to me, and mamma would cry so bitterly. I have told Reginal a great deal, but he may not understand. May I go on?"

Earny could not reply, but she resumed her old position.

"In my drawer, dear—that small one, nearest the window—are my two gold watches and chains; one I had when at school, and the other papa gave me when I left. I should like my little twin nieces to have them, in remembrance of their aunt, whom they have never seen. My pearl necklace is for Minnie, and the brooch of emeralds and rubies, in the same case, will you give to your mamma for my sake; and this," she said, twisting round a beautiful little diamond ring, which she wore on the third finger of her left hand, "you must return to him"—she knew there was no need to specify to whom—"with my fondest love, to keep in remembrance of one who was almost his wife."

This last was the hardest task of all. Oh, why

had not Clara chosen some other to give him back that ring?

Thus she went on, until she had named some little present for every one. "Sarah helped me yesterday, before any of you were up," continued Clara, "and I have ticketed them all; she will tell you where to find them. Will you promise to see to all this for me, Earny?"

"Yes, dearest, as far as I can."

"And your marriage; don't forget, Earny, and please give this to Mr. Montravers," and she pulled out a small sealed pencilled note from under her pillow, and placed it in Earny's hand.

"It is to wish him good-by," she said, seeing Earny's look of surprise. "I have asked him to read it to you. Do not send it, but give it to him yourself when I am gone. I have spoken to papa about my grave, and he said everything should be as I liked. So I am not to be buried in that cold dreary vault; but to have a grave under that beautiful old beech tree in the churchyard; and mamma will have flowers planted on it, and creepers to climb round the white marble cross; and whenever you come here you will gather some of the flowers, and think of Clara, won't you, dear Earny?"

"Clara, dearest Clara, I shall always think of you. I never can forget all you have been to me."

"And you to me, Earny. Thank you, thank you, for all your love and kindness; and forgive

me for everything I have ever done to vex you. I have often been very wayward."

She would not let Earny contradict her, and said, "She should like to try to go to sleep." And Earny arranged her pillows, and then sending Sarah to watch by her side, went to her own room to bathe her swollen eyes.

She was thus engaged when her mamma came in, looking more angry than she had ever seen her in her whole life before.

"What can be the matter, dear mamma," she said.

"I thought you were with Clara, dear; and I came up here because I could not bear to listen to that man's selfishness any longer. It is evident that he cares for no one but himself; instead of trying to bear his grief like a man, and comforting Lord and Lady Dexham, he has been pacing up and down the room, wringing his hands, declaring he cannot live without Clara, and has even gone so far as to petition Lord Dexham to let her be his wife, if only for a few days. He said he would get a special licence; what did money matter if she could but be his, and they could be married here."

"He must be mad!" exclaimed Earny.

"So Lord Dexham told him, to propose such a thing; and then he got into a passion and told them they did not know what his feelings were; it was perfect cruelty; and upbraided Lord Dexham for having made them wait so long."

“ I felt so tempted to speak that I was obliged to leave the room. Don't you see his scheme, Earny? Clara once his wife, her money must be his, and he will be able to pay his debts. Depend upon it his creditors are only waiting for this ; and immediately a notice of her death appears in the papers, they will be all upon him. If Lord and Lady Dexham only knew as much of him as Mr. Montravers has told us they would turn him out of the house at once. Really, Earny, if by any possibility Clara should recover, that marriage should never take place if I could prevent it.”

Earny for a moment almost wished that Lord Dexham would agree to his proposal.

“ Then we had better sit up here for a little while, as he has the whole range of the house. Or, will you come with me and call on Lotte, mamma? She asked me to bring you ; and dearest Clara has made my eyes so red that perhaps the air will do them good. Poor Lotte ! she says she cannot stay away much longer.”

When Mrs. Dalton and Earny returned, Captain Macclaughton had left Hurst Park. Dr. Bird had been to see Clara ; and Captain Macclaughton had questioned him as to whether there was any possibility of her recovering. Hearing that in all probability she could not survive more than three or four days at the utmost, he said, important business had been waiting for him abroad which he had



intended to execute on their wedding tour, but as that would never take place, he could not defer it any longer. Therefore, he had taken a hasty farewell of Clara, and left by the last train.

His absence was a relief to all, even to Clara, for his excited manner was more than her strength was equal to, and Earny hoped she might never see him again.

The house seemed quieter now he was gone, more suited to the solemn event that was to happen in it; though Lord and Lady Dexham could not help feeling vexed that one who had made such large professions of love for their daughter should leave the neighbourhood without desiring to pay the last tribute of respect to her memory.

It was on the evening of the second day after his departure that Clara was lying in her favourite place by the window, while her mamma, and Mrs. Dalton and Earny were all seated near her, talking of Lotte and the little twins; she had been apparently sleeping, but opening her eyes she looked up, and smiled at her mamma with a brighter eye and more colour in her cheek than she had had ever since that last walk with Captain Macclaughton.

"You seem much better, to-day, my darling child," said Lady Dexham, pushing back a stray lock of Clara's dark auburn curls, which the evening breeze had blown across her forehead. "Who knows, dear; perhaps you may be restored to us

yet," and a gleam of hope stole across Lady Dexham's face.

For a moment Clara did not speak; then a sweet incredulous smile lighted up her features, and taking her mamma's hand in hers, she repeated in a soft clear voice those beautiful and well-known lines of Tickell:—

*"I hear a voice you cannot hear,  
Which says, I must not stay;  
I see a hand you cannot see,  
Which beckons me away."*

Lady Dexham burst into tears, and throwing her arms around Clara, exclaimed, "Oh, my precious precious child! I cannot part with you; indeed, I cannot!"

Clara was not prepared for the effect which her words had produced, and for a moment looked distressed; then, turning to Earny, said, "Will you try to comfort her, Earny. You always know what to say to every one. You must love her when I am gone. Will you let her, dear Mrs. Dalton? Will you spare a little of Earny's love for my own mamma, for you have Minnie, and she will be left alone."

"We all love your dear mamma now, and when you are parted from us, she and I will share Earny's love between us. We will try to comfort her, dear Clara. You must trust her to our care;" and Clara drew Mrs. Dalton towards her, and kissed her for that promise.

And as they went to bed that night, Mrs. Dalton pressed Earny to her heart, and said, "Oh, Earny! what should I do if I were in Lady Dexham's place and you were Clara?"

"But you love Clara very dearly, mamma?"

"Yes, dear; very very dearly; more than any one, next to yourself and Minnie. You would not have me love her more than you, Earny?"

And Earny answered truly when she said, "Oh, no!"

The evening came again; but Clara was not on her couch. "She felt too tired," she said, "for Lotte had been to see her, and she had taken her last farewell. She had told Lotte so; but Lotte could not believe it, and said she should make Reginal bring her again to-morrow."

It was a beautiful evening; a soft balmy breeze just stirred the tops of the trees, and the birds twittered among the branches; the window was open, and Clara lay on her bed gazing far away, it seemed, into the clear grey sky.

Mrs. Dalton came forward and offered her some slight refreshment; but she smiled, and said, "No; thank you. Never any more. Where is mamma?" she continued.

"Here, darling," said Lady Dexham from the other side of the bed.

"And papa, and Earny, and Reginal?"

Lady Dexham rang the bell violently; and in a

few minutes they were all standing around her bed.

"Will you lift me up a little?" she said to Mrs. Dalton, who was standing nearest to her. "I want to see the sun once more before I go." She watched it, as it was slowly setting, for a few minutes; and Mrs. Dalton caught the words, "Those mansions in the sky." Then, lying back on her pillows, with Mrs. Dalton's arm still under them, she whispered, "Earny, what was Nora Elstree's verse? Will you say it? About the mansions."

Earny repeated it.

"Now, all come and kiss me; and then, then—" The remainder of the sentence was not heard, for each pressed forward to get a last embrace.

Earny feared that her turn would never come. It came at last, and convulsive sobs echoed through the room as Earny stepped aside; and Clara, with her soft eyes fixed lovingly on her mamma's face, lent more heavily on Mrs. Dalton's arm, and they knew her spirit was at rest.

Mrs. Dalton closed the eyes, and laid her gently down; pressed one kiss on the clear transparent brow, and then led Lady Dexham from the room.

## CHAPTER VII.

THE village shops were all closed ; scarcely a sound was heard in the street as the village church-bell tolled.

It was the day of Clara's funeral. The sun shone warm and bright ; the birds sang their loudest hymns of praise ; and all nature seemed joyous ; but not a heart amongst all those now wending their way to the quiet churchyard beat in unison with it. For why ? They were about to see deposited in that freshly made grave the remains of one who had endeared herself to the hearts of all.

The village school children had put away their little wedding gifts, which they could no longer bear to look upon, and were bringing their choicest flowers to strew upon Clara's grave.

A petition had gone forth from many of them, that they might be allowed to take a last look of her who was so soon to be hid out of their sight ; and Lady Dexham had not liked to disappoint them ; there-

fore, for one hour one afternoon, all who liked had come and had seen her as she lay in her blue velvet coffin, with white roses and myrtle sprigs upon and around her.

Many of the village children were there ; and two of them had brought freshly gathered wild flowers in their hands, and had begged Sarah Tibs to allow them to place just one or two by Clara's side.

"Miss Molesworth was so fond of wild flowers," they said, "and had told them such pretty things about them." And they had put them there ; and when the coffin was closed they looked faded ; yet no one was allowed to move them away.

And now the church-bell tolled, solemnly and slowly, and the park gates were thrown open, and down the road there came a long, long, dark, procession ; and then, as nearer and nearer it came, every hat was raised out of respect for her who was brought, and for them who came.

Lord and Lady Dexham, and Reginal, and Mrs. Dalton, occupied the first carriage, as chief mourners ; then followed Sir John Macclaughton, Mr. Branscombe, Earny, and Mr. Montravers, in the second carriage ; then came distant relatives of Lady Dexham ; and after them a long line of carriages occupied by all the neighbouring gentry.

The church was crowded ; and as Mr. Wilmot read, in a clear impressive voice, the service for the dead, sob after sob burst forth from young and old,

for every one there remembered that this was to have been Clara's wedding-day.

And they bore her out again from the sacred edifice from which she was this day to have come forth a bride, and laid her in her chosen resting place, under the spreading branches of the old beech tree; and the procession dispersed, but many an old woman and young child lingered round to catch a last glimpse, or to strew a flower upon the bright blue coffin beneath them.

"Ah dame!" said the old woman, whose conversation had so attracted Earny's attention on that memorable feast day, addressing her neighbour; "I tould 'ee 'ow 'twould be. 'Twere an angel's beauty, and she be an angel now. The Lord help us to follow her!"

"Amen," ejaculated the other, and they bent their way homeward.

The shutters were unclosed, the blinds were drawn up; everything looked as usual at Hurst Park, and any stranger passing near might have exclaimed, "What a lovely place!" and thought not of the sorrowing hearts that beat within its precincts.

Mrs. Dalton and Earny were still there, also Mr. Montravers, for Lord Dexham and Reginal begged him to remain; he was so kind, knew so exactly what to say to cheer and comfort them, that he seemed unto them almost like a son and

a brother; and poor Earny, she wanted comforting too, for sorrow pressed heavily upon her.

She and Mrs. Dalton were everything to Lady Dexham and Lotte; and Clara, could she have watched them—perhaps she did—would have seen how faithfully they performed their promise.

But days flew on, and Mrs. Dalton said she must return home. She had heard from Mr. Montravers how well Minnie behaved, and Grace had helped her to write a little note, in which she asked them to come back soon, to tell her all about her pretty sister, as she would persist in calling Clara.

They had been away more than three weeks, and Mrs. Dalton said she must go home to see about Minnie's mourning; she and Earny had had theirs made by Sarah Tibs, who was only too glad to work for those who had so loved her dear young mistress.

They had had it unnecessarily deep, Mrs. Dalton thought, but Earny had requested to have such as would be worn for a sister, and she had consented.

Mr. Montravers was very gentle to Earny; he had always been so, yet now there was a humility mixed with it which deeply touched her; she saw he had not forgiven himself for his unkind thoughts respecting her.

He knew nothing of Captain Macclaughton,



except that he had left Hurst Park while Clara was still alive, for Lord Dexham and Reginald did not care to talk of him, and it was a name that he dared not mention to Earny; it recalled too painfully their last interview at the cottage.

Earny had given him Clara's note, yet he had not read it to her, nor told her of its contents; she thought he had forgotten it.

"I cannot spare you both at once," said Lady Dexham, as Mrs. Dalton mentioned to her the day they had fixed for their departure; so it was arranged that Mr. Montravers should take Mrs. Dalton home, and Earny remain a few weeks longer at the Park.

"Please, mamma dear," said Earny, as she wished Mrs. Dalton good-by on the platform of the railway station; "please remember that you promised me Minnie's mourning should be just like mine; please don't forget the crape tucks;" and Mrs. Dalton, as she stepped into a carriage, thought "how dearly Earny loved poor Clara."

Thus Earny was left behind to comfort others, when she, poor girl! needed it more than any of them. But she strove to bear up and to fill a daughter's place to Lord and Lady Dexham, in the stead of her whom they had loved and lost; and often, as she went from one to the other to fetch a book or a workbasket, or do some other little trifle, all nothing in themselves, but made


great by the spirit in which they were performed, they would dry their tears, and smile, and bless her for her love.

When Lord and Lady Dexham could spare her she was always in requisition at the Park Cottage, for there were three babies there, and Earny was a capital nurse. Little Freddy made her as he had formerly done Clara—a slave to all his whims—and Lotte feared he would be quite spoilt.

The twins were a source of great amusement to Lady Dexham, and she would spend many an hour at the Park Cottage, nursing one in each arm, and trying to discover some likeness in them to her lost Clara.

“I really think the eyes will be like hers, don’t you, Earny?” she asked one day; “it will be strange if we cannot find some resemblance to her in one of them;” and Earny only smiled, thinking the strangeness would be if she could.

Earny and Reginal were friends now; it may be that she had learnt to appreciate his character in noting his fondness for Lotte, his sisterly affection for Clara; but she no longer avoided him, and sought to make him forget in the innocent gambols of his little boy, the sad events of the last few weeks; and Lotte, too, needed her care and love, for she was still far from strong; Clara’s death following so soon after the birth of her little daughters had been well nigh too much for her.



The physician advised her trying change of air, but they none of them seemed to like the idea of forsaking even for a time, that quiet nook in the village churchyard. However, as day by day passed, and her strength did not increase, they at last consented to try the sea-air for a month.

It was the day before their departure; the packing was all over, and Earny was standing at Clara's bedroom window, looking out, it would appear, on the lovely scene before her; but it was not so; she could not have told if any one had crossed the lawn, nor if a cloud had traversed the deep blue sky; her thoughts were sometimes far away at her home at Wickhamstead, sometimes with the silent dead; sometimes trying to discover the hidden path of the future.

What would the future be to her? she saw it more distinctly than she had for many months past, yet the path was by no means clear.

As she was standing thus, Lady Dexham entered the room unperceived, and coming up to Earny, rested her arm within hers, and said,

"Thinking of her, Earny?"

Earny started as if she feared that Lady Dexham had indeed read her thoughts truly.

"I did not mean to startle you," she said; "Sarah Tibs told me she thought I should find you here, and I came to talk a little while. I have come, Earny, to speak to you of my darling Clara's last

wishes. Reginal explained them to me long ago, but I have never felt courage enough to talk to you about them until now."

"She told me Sarah knew where everything was placed; shall I ask her to come?" said Earny, relieved that Lady Dexham had spoken of a subject to which she feared to allude; and yet she could not bear to leave Hurst Park without having fulfilled her promise to Clara of seeing them in some degree carried into effect.

"Thank you, dear, no. I went over everything with her yesterday, and have directed each thing as dearest Clara ticketed it. I should like you to read over the list. Reginal told me that you knew what was for every one."

It was a very hard task for both of them, but they got through it; and then Lady Dexham, placing her hand on a large oaken chest, pointed to the direction in Clara's own handwriting:—"Clara Molesworth's wedding present to dear Earny Dalton."

"Dear Lady Dexham, I cannot take them; indeed, I cannot," said Earny, now totally overcome; and, burying her face in her hands, she cried as though her heart would break.

Lady Dexham tried to soothe her, and told her Clara wished it; they must all try to do what Clara asked. It seemed as if Lady Dexham had nerved herself for the task of carrying out her child's

wishes, for she had herself assisted Sarah in collecting together everything that composed Clara's *trousseau*, and placing them in a large commodious chest, Sarah had nailed on the card which Clara had given her for that purpose.

"Whenever you wear any of them, Earny, you will think of my dear, precious child, and may you be as happy as we all wish you;" and Lady DEXHAM pressed one of Clara's kisses on that burning brow.

The morrow came, and with it their departure from Hurst Park. They were to travel all together for a few miles, and then Earny was to branch off to Wickhamstead alone.

As the train made a curve on the line a white marble cross met their view in the distance, standing in the shade of an old beech tree, and Earny grasped more tightly the flowers that she held in her hand.

How gladly Earny was welcomed home. They had sadly missed her, they said, more than ever before; perhaps it was because death had entered their circle, and they feared lest any other might be snatched away by his strong grasp.

And Earny, too, seemed glad to be at home again; for that same evening, when Mr. Montravers and Grace had left, and Minnie was gone to bed, she seated herself in her old place at her mother's feet, and laying her head in her lap, said, "Dear, mamma, we have been very happy here."

“ Yes, my dear ; and I am so glad we are all here together again,” and Mrs Dalton, as she spoke, passed her hands, in her old accustomed way, over Earny’s silky hair.

A month passed by, and Mrs. Dalton was regaining her usual health and spirits. She had not been very well on her return from Hurst Park, but Earny’s light-heartedness and buoyancy seemed all to have forsaken her ; for hours she would sit by Mrs. Dalton’s side and work, yet perhaps never say a word unless in reply to some observation from her mamma ; and even then, when addressed, she would start as if aroused from some deep reverie.

Mrs. Dalton noticed it, and feared it would be a long time before she recovered the effects of Clara’s death.

Mr. Montravers and Grace were constantly with her, doing all in their power to rouse her from her painful apathy ; and it began to dawn upon Mrs. Dalton’s mind, that, notwithstanding all Mr. Montravers’s love and attention to Earny, it was strange he was not in more haste to make her his wife ; perhaps, she thought, this might in some degree account for Earny’s depression of spirits. Mr. Montravers had never told her that it was Earny’s choice the marriage had been so long delayed.

And Earny herself knew not what course to pursue. Her conscience told her that it would be wrong to trifle any longer with his affection ; yet

what could she do? She could not go to him and say, now I will be your wife; and when would he summon courage to name such a subject to her again after his last bitter disappointment. She must wait—wait now, as she had made him wait before, and then, when he asked again, she must fix the day, and then—then—all must be told.

Mrs. Dalton lay awake some hours, revolving in her own mind all the circumstances of Earny's engagement, and after long deliberation resolved to discover, if possible, without directly asking the question, what Earny's own opinion was respecting its length.

Of course she did not expect or wish them to be married directly, so soon after Clara's death, still she thought it was right that there should be some definite understanding between them. She knew there had not been, or Earny would have told her. Her previous anxiety respecting how to provide her child with a *trousseau* suitable to her position was now removed. She had written to Lady Dexham thanking her very warmly for her own and dear Clara's forethought, saying at the same time that she was sure it was far too costly, though she had not seen it, for Earny. Therefore, though deeply grateful for the feeling which prompted its presentation, she could on no account think of allowing her child to accept what must be to them all a sacred relic of the departed.

And Lady Dexham had replied much in the same manner. That she had spoken to Earny, adding that Earny must confer the favour on them of accepting it.

Mrs. Dalton, therefore, feeling that Lady Dexham would consider any further refusal proceeded from pride, had allowed it to be as Clara wished.

The breakfast things had been removed, and Mrs. Dalton was considering in what way to introduce the subject of her night's meditation to Earny, when the door opened and in came Mr. Montravers.

"I am going to drive to Longwater this morning," he said, after shaking hands with Mrs. Dalton and Earny, "on some business connected with some land adjoining the Grange. I want to take Earny with me, if she is not better engaged. Will you come with me, dear?" he continued, more gently, addressing Earnestine.

The air was cool and refreshing, and Earny felt that she wanted something to brighten her up, therefore her "Oh, yes, with pleasure," had more animation in its tone than he had heard for many weeks.

She was not long in putting on her hat and cloak, and was soon by Mr. Montravers's side in the open barouche.

"How delightful it is," he said, after driving on for a few minutes in silence, "to have you back



with us again, dearest; the time seemed so long while you were at Hurst Park."

"Did it? it was a very sad time; sadder than any I ever felt. We all loved Clara so very dearly."

"Say all but one, Earny dear. I never can believe that he—Captain Macclaughton, I mean," and Mr. Montravers's voice trembled as he pronounced that name—"had one spark of affection for her, or he never would have left the Park while a breath remained; at least, I know I could not have done so had it been you, which, thank God, it was not," and he drew her cloak more tightly around her, lest a breath of wind might come near to hurt her.

"How could he remain?" asked Earny. "Do you not think that, as mamma says, his creditors would have seized him the moment they knew that there was no chance of his having any of Clara's fortune."

"Undoubtedly they would, dear; they are looking everywhere for him now, and are in a dreadful fury at his having escaped them. A whole swarm of them have been to his father's seat in Scotland, and even, I believe, to Hurst Park, but they can find no clue to his whereabouts. Does not this prove that he had no real love for Miss Molesworth? Had he loved her truly, and as he professed to do, would he have sought to mar all her future prospects of love and happiness, by making her the wife of a gamester and a spendthrift?"

Mr. Montravers had spoken strongly, but it was only as he felt, and Earny thought how wrongly she would have acted had she allowed that marriage to take place without confessing all.

"You heard of his unfeeling request, I suppose?" said Earny.

"No, dear. What do you mean?"

"Did not Lord Dexham tell you that he begged to be allowed to get a special licence that she might be his wife, if only for a few days."

"The villain!" exclaimed Mr. Montravers, "you cannot really mean that he proposed such a thing! Did not Lord Dexham suspect his motives?"

"No, I think not. They thought it very absurd and unfeeling; but that was all, I think."

"How far better is it for Miss Molesworth to be in her grave than to be the wife of such a man. Do you know what her marriage portion was to have been?"

"No, I never heard; some thousands, I suppose. I believe Lord Dexham is very rich."

"Seventy thousand pounds," said Mr. Montravers. "Lord Dexham told me so himself; a nice windfall—more than sufficient to pay all the creditors."

"Seventy thousand pounds!" slowly ejaculated Earny; the enormity of the sum in her eyes almost frightened her.

"Are you quite sure?" she said. "Can it really be so much?"

"Lord Dexham told me so, dear."

"Riches are a great temptation," she said.

"Very great to some; indeed, to all."

"Not to you," said Earny, softly; "you have not sought them."

"Yes, I have," Earny.

"How?" she asked, looking up at him with surprise.

"Her price is above rubies," was his reply.

They had now reached the entrance leading to Longwater, and Mr. Montravers asked Earny if she would object to letting the carriage wait for them there, and walk with him a little way over the fields instead of going round by the high road.

Earny said she should like it, and Mr. Montravers placing her arm in his, led her round by a path that had been a great favourite with Clara during her visit to Wickhampstead.

Presently they came to the felled trunks of some old trees, on which she had often rested, while the others went hither and thither, gathering the wild flowers, of which she was so fond.

"Shall we sit here a little while?" he asked.

Earny seated herself, and was about to make some remark respecting the last time Clara was there, when Mr. Montravers, taking a small pencilled note from his pocket placed it in her hand,

saying, "She asks me to show it to you, Earny, otherwise I should not have dared to do so. Let it be as you like, dearest. I will go away while you read it, and when I come back, if it is to be as she wished, you will keep the note for me; if not, you will close it up and return it to me, and we will forget that you have seen it." He turned off as he finished speaking, and Earny, with trembling fingers, opened it and read:

"Dear Mr. Montravers,

"I am not strong enough to write much, but I want to tell you that I hope you and my own Earny will be very, very happy. Please do not let her put off your marriage because of my death. I have told her she must not wait more than three months. Will you show her this when I am gone? Good-by, dear Mr. Montravers; be very kind to dearest Earny. I know you will.

"From your dying friend,

"CLARA MOLESWORTH."

Tears glistened in Earny's eyes as she tried to recognise in these straggling wavy lines Clara's former neat and familiar handwriting.

This, her last note, had been written in trying to promote Earny's happiness, and ought she not to do as she wished? Yes, it must be so; she had tacitly promised Clara that thus it should be, only there was the difference of a month; she had not agreed to

three, but four months, and Clara had forgotten to make any alteration in the then already written note. Two months were nearly gone, only one left; it must be two more, not a day less.

She was sitting just as he had left her, when Mr. Montravers returned; the note lay lying open on her lap, and she made no effort to close it or return it to him. Could it be possible, he thought, that there really was to be no further delay, no further objection to offer. For a moment he paused, as if to assure himself that she had not given him back the note, then, seating himself beside her, he laid his hand on hers, and said, "Really, Earny, can it be true?"

"Yes," she answered softly, "as you and she wish."

The urgent business that brought Mr. Montravers to Longwater had lost all importance in his eyes; "it could wait until another day," he said, when Earny ventured to remind him of it.

They met the carriage at the place appointed, but it was sent back empty; the roads were dusty; they preferred walking home through the lanes, and Earny explained about the mistake in that one month, and so it was decided they were to wait until the expiration of the four.

As Mr. Montravers brought Earny into their pretty little sitting-room, he walked up to Mrs. Dalton, who was sitting there at work, and stooping

down kissed her cheek, saying, "Earny has given me leave in two months' time to call you mother."

"That can never be!" almost burst from Earny's lips, but she checked herself, and rushing out of the room, left all the explanation to Mr. Montravers.

## CHAPTER VIII.

"THERE'S another of 'em down with it, ma'am, and the youngest baint expected to live through the day; so 'em says. She do look awful bad, and no mistake. I hear there's another family took in Basleses Court, and that they aint got no doctor, and scarcely a morsel of a thing to eat. It's a right out bad case, too, 'em tells me."

"Bring my bonnet then, Betty, quick, and while I am putting it on, run into the larder and put up anything you can find. Stay! How is Sally?"

"Better of the fever, ma'am; but uncommonly weak. She aint eat anything for jist upon a month."

"Poor thing!" sighed Miss Vickers. "The mother has a heavy trial with them all. I shall be surprised if any of them recover;" and Betty went upon her errand.

She had just returned from carrying a basket of provisions to a family sore stricken with fever, and on her way home had heard of this new case in Basleses Court.

For days and weeks the fever—typhus fever—had been gaining ground at Wickhampstead ; at first it was considered to be only a bad form of scarlet ; but now there was no mistaking it. It was typhus, with its worst symptoms. Alarm began to be felt ; and many of those who could afford it had locked up their houses, and gone off with children and servants, to escape infection ; but not so with Miss Vickers. Wherever she heard of any suffering, with none or scarcely any one to help them, there was she at once to be found. Her friends called her crazy, and shunned her as they passed her in the streets. “ But what did this matter ? ” she said. “ She did not mean to visit them or hold any communication with them, unless they were ill and needed her ; but the sick and the suffering were around her, and wanted help, and she had the means and the time ; and shame be to her if she had not the will.”

Thus day by day she passed among the sick and the dying, giving a word of sympathy here, a cup of cold water there, or both, as the case might need ; and many a worn-out mother or heart-stricken father, as they watched her sitting by their children’s bed, soothing them with almost a mother’s tenderness, would ask God to bless and preserve her from all evil. And He did bless her in the love of all around her. Even those who called her crazy could not but admire her noble self-devoted-



ness. Who can tell? Perhaps some day they may be inclined to follow her good example.

Betty was a firm adherent and supporter of her mistress; wherever she went, Betty followed. "It weren't no good a biding shut up all by oneself like," as she said; "much better be after doing summat for those who wanted it. If she was to have the fever, she spos'd she should get it, but may be it might come for her when she was not at home to receive it."

But Betty, like her mistress, had her opponents, the most pertinacious of whom was her renowned follower, Jim.

"How could he come near her?" he said, "smelling, as he vowed she did, of infection and all the horribleness out of them nasty houses. He never could give her a kiss with any comfort now."

"Then, if he couldn't he might keep his kisses away, and hisself into the bargain, for aught she cared. 'Twas like his imperance," she called it, "for he to talk of them nasty houses; why they was every one of 'em a fine job better than his'n, with his stinking rabbits, and growling dogs; if they wasn't too bad for her betters," meaning her mistress, "to go into, they wasn't too bad for her, so if he thought hisself too fine a gennelman for such company, he had best keep away all together—that's all she had got to tell 'en."

Jim took her at her word, and remained away a whole week, but passing at the end of it, and

seeing her chatting and laughing with his rival, Bob Saunders, he thought he had best come to terms, and promised to pay her a visit the next evening, provided she was in one of her best humours.

“Then I’ll just be in one of my worst,” retorted Betty, when he made the proposition to her, “if that’ll keep ye away. I ain’t knowed such a comfortable week as this last, ever since I first set eyes on ye. Those great red cheeks of yours looks delicat; I advise ye to keep yer distance. I have just come right off from one o’ them nasty houses, where the fever is terrible.”

Jim stepped back, and Betty with a hearty laugh slammed the door in his face, and told him to be gone for a craven-hearted booby.

Since then, she had not chosen to take any notice of him, and poor Jim was getting very unhappy. Betty saw it, but said, “It didn’t hurt her, and would do him good, so things had better remain as ’em was; ’twould teach ’en to know hisself better another time.”

She was not long in filling Miss Vickers’s reticule basket with various scraps from the larder, and hurried in with them almost before her mistress had had time to put on her bonnet.

“There baint much, ma’am; them Dickenses had almost all as was left yesterday but I’ll soon cook ’em up summat, if y’ll tell me what; taint likely they got much fire there to spare.”

"I must see what they want first, Betty, and hear what the doctor says. I wonder where I shall find him; nowhere, I daresay. Put me in a bottle of that mixture the Smiths had; they can have a dose of that until he can be found. How many children are there, Betty? Did you hear?"

"No, ma'am; but there's sure to be lots of 'em; there always is were they baint wanted; a dozen of 'em, at least, you may be sure."

"I hope not, for their mother's sake; however, I will go and see;" and Miss Vickers departed on her errand.

She found the case much as Betty had reported it—seven children; three of them down with the fever, and two others sickening for it; the father dead, and the mother unable to go to work to earn anything to support them, from not having any one to attend to the sick children. This was one of the most deplorable cases that Miss Vickers had met with, and she at once set about finding some means of having it remedied. The first thing to be done was to find the doctor, and Emma, the only one of the children who appeared to be in good health, was despatched to his house with a note from Miss Vickers, asking him to come to them as soon as possible. The few things Betty had put into the reticule were soon disposed of by the two little things who were only sickening, and then Miss Vickers nursed the baby while the poor worn out

mother "tidied up the place a bit," as she said, "before the doctor came."

Fortunately he was at home when Emma brought the note, and came off directly. He pronounced the symptoms to be very bad—very bad indeed. "He ought," he said, "to have been called in hours ago; it was a great chance now if either of the three recovered." However, he did what he could for them, and promised to come again in the course of the day.

As soon as he was gone, Emma was again sent out to buy some food for herself and mother; the poor creature said she had no heart to eat, but Miss Vickers persuaded her to take to try, and at last succeeded in making her take a comfortable meal.

The next thing to be done was to find some one to come to help nurse the children, but here was the difficulty, directly the fever showed itself in any house every one kept aloof, and the mother knew of no one whom she could ask to do such a thing. At last, Miss Vickers thought of a poor girl, herself lately recovered from the fever, yet strong enough to be of some assistance to the little sufferers, and having rocked the baby to sleep set off in search of her.

Mary Jinks at once consented to come. What would she not have done if Miss Vickers had asked it? and ere Miss Vickers went home she had lightened the mother's heart of half her cares by promising to provide all that was really necessary for the poor, sick, suffering children.

She had many more visits to pay that day, as she had every day, and everywhere she found something to do—something to give. The queer looking bonnet never excited remark now, or, if it did, it was always welcomed as being the sign of the approach of the kind-looking lady who wore it.

The child whom Betty had said was not expected to live through the day, Miss Vickers found just drawing its last breath; so there, there was the mother to be comforted, and the funeral arrangements to be talked about.

So much sickness and so many deaths had fallen heavily on the parish funds. In some instances, where parish relief was never sought except as a last resource, Miss Vickers had defrayed all expenses out of her own purse, and here she promised to do the same.

How the mother's eye brightened in the midst of her tears, as she heard from Miss Vickers's own lips that her child should not have a pauper's grave.

"Thank ye! thank ye! a thousand times, mum, for this and all yer other kindnesses," said the poor woman, as Miss Vickers shook her hand at parting; "Ye have been good to me, indeed; there aint a poor creature in the town but what blesses ye, mum, both young and old."

And when Miss Vickers returned home this night, as on so many others, wearied in body but not in mind, the remembrance of the poor people's bless-

ings was sweet unto her, and she lay down to sleep at night happy in the consciousness of having done something for others out of love to Him who had done so much for her.

The money she spent amongst them she looked upon as Earny's, not her own ; she had intended to lay it out in purchasing all that was necessary for the young bride elect, but as that was no longer needed, to what better purpose could it be applied than in providing food and clothing for those who needed it? True, Earny knew nothing of the intended gift, but it was a gift nevertheless, and the money was virtually hers ; she knew Earny would like it so expended.

The inmates of the cottage had not fled away with their more wealthy neighbours, neither had Mr. Montravers nor Grace ; but Mrs. Montravers and Nannette had gone to Torquay for a few weeks, and were very angry that Grace persisted in not accompanying them.

" Absurd nonsense ! " Mrs. Montravers said it was, " for her to be always dancing attendance upon her brother, just because he chose to stay behind to be near that trumpery girl ; but there, she had to thank Grace for the connexion, and what could she expect after that ? "

Mr. Montravers had rather pressed Mrs. Dalton to take Earny and Minnie a little way further into the country, but she would not agree to the plan ;

and when they heard of some, who having gone, carrying the infection with them, had thus been taken ill, and in some instances died, far from the comforts of home, Mr. Montravers confessed that she had acted prudently. They took every necessary precaution, and then rested contentedly—true, at every approach of headache or any other little ailment, Dr. Biggs was called in, and they were subjected to minute examination—for this was considered the best means of preventing any fatal effects by taking the thing in time.

Miss Vickers never came near the cottage—nothing could persuade her to do so; but Mr. Montravers generally called at her house to inquire for her every morning, and to bring the report to Earny, and loud were the praises her unwearying love and self-denial called forth.

Three months out of the four of Earny's marriage reprieve had passed, and but one more remained.

The large oaken chest had been sent from Hurst Park, and magnificent were its contents—such dresses, such shawls and mantles, as Earny thought she never could put on, and many were the tears shed, as the sight of all this recalled so vividly to their minds the dear one who had made the gift.

The alterations to be made in some things were but slight, in others, more considerable, but they were progressing favourably, and nothing scarcely

but the one great event was ever now talked about. Minnie was radiant in happiness at the thought of being bridesmaid, and Grace not much less so; as for Mr. Montravers, there was no describing how happy he felt, each hour seemed too long for him. In four weeks more would not Earny be his own!

Mrs. Dalton, though feeling sad sometimes at the thought of being separated from her child, even by so short a distance as from the cottage to the Grange, yet could not help being proud at the prospect of her being the wife of such a man as Mr. Montravers, and consequently her heart felt light also.

But not so Earny's, at least not in appearance, at times whilst sitting at work, or engaged with Minnie's lessons, which she would not discontinue until obliged, the tears would gather in her eyes, and if she looked up and found her mamma watching her, she would put down her work, or book, or whatever she might be doing, and throwing herself on the ground beside Mrs. Dalton, would bury her face in her mamma's lap and cry bitterly.

If Mr. Montravers or Grace were present, she would try to conquer her emotion, but she was not always successful; and they thought what a loving child she was; doubtless it was the prospect of parting from her mamma that made her at times so sad.

Mr. Montravers at first rather liked to think of



Earny thus. If she were capable of loving her mother so strongly, would she not one day love him equally, perhaps more? But as the marriage day approached, and Earny appeared to grow more and more unhappy, he began to wish that she would meet him with a little more joy, would show a little more pleasure in the prospect of the coming happiness. He ventured once to throw out a slight hint on the subject, and then she evidently tried to look more happy, but it was plainly to be seen that it was an effort to her to do so.

They were sitting all together one evening, about three weeks before the eventful day, when the servant brought in a letter and gave it to Earny. It had come by the evening post.

"For me?" said Earny, as she took it from the servant's hand; "who can it be from? I do not know the writing."

Mr. Montravers, who was sitting next her, could not but observe that the direction was written in a gentleman's hand.

Earny opened it and read a few lines; and then, as if in doubt, turned to the signature. With trembling hands she closed the fly-leaf again, and going back to the first page, read it steadily through.

Mrs. Dalton watched her and grew alarmed as she noticed the evident agitation into which the contents threw her. She waited a few minutes

thinking that Earny would pass the letter to her to read or read it herself aloud, as she always did all letters, except those she received from Mr. Montravers; but Earny held it tightly in her hand, while a look of deep sorrow and perplexity rested on her face; and Mrs. Dalton, fearing that something dreadful had occurred at Hurst Park, and that Earny lacked the power to speak, was about to take the letter to read it for herself, when with a sudden effort Earny thrust away her mamma's hand; and ere she knew what she was doing, had torn the letter into nearly a hundred pieces.

They were all astonished, and begged Earny to tell them what had happened to agitate her so strongly; but she declined, saying it concerned only herself. Then, as they urged her again to tell them, she burst into a violent fit of weeping, and entreated them to leave her alone. "She wanted to be quiet; she must have time to think;" and in doubt as to what had better be done, they let her have her way.

Mr. Montravers went home that night, feeling, he knew not why, that a weight—heavy, nay, almost insupportable—was hanging over his head, which would fall on him and crush him, without his having the power to avert it.

"From whom did that letter come? And why did its contents so distress Earnestine?" were questions he often asked himself, and to which he could give no satisfactory reply. That it was directed in

a gentleman's handwriting he felt persuaded ; but who could the gentleman be ? Not Lord Dexham nor Reginal ; he knew their writing well ; and the thought arose—dared he to dwell upon it—that it might be Captain Macclaughton's.

Then he thought over that painful conversation with Earny, and how she had allowed that it was true that he had pressed her hand, that she had clung to his arm ; yet she had given him no reason for her so doing. What did all this mean ?

And then her evident uneasiness as the marriage day drew near ; her great effort to appear happy when in his presence. Was it not a proof that she cared not for him ? The thought was distracting ; but come it would, and he resolved to give her up if she wished it. Her loved her too truly to seek to join their paths through life unless with her full, her perfect consent. It was well for Earny that no one but Grace was near to observe his deep depression. Had Mrs. Montravers or Nannette been present, they might have tempted him to say or do something which he would have ever afterwards regretted.

Grace soothed him ; she was herself perplexed, but her faith in Earny never faltered.

And Earny, too ! What a night she spent tossing about on her pillow in weariness of spirit. It must be told now, she could delay it no longer, the secret that had been weighing her down for so many many months. How could she do it ? What could she

say to make them understand, or comprehend the difficulties of her position! Might not her mamma insist on seeing that letter? Might not Mr. Montrovers, with all fairness, do so also; and would not that lead to everything else? She might refuse to explain its contents; the letter itself would enlighten them but little. Yet, with such a key, might they not discover all for themselves?

Then she recollected that she had destroyed it; and the remembrance of how she had rudely thrust aside her mamma's hand as she endeavoured to take it, was almost more bitter to her than anything else.

What must they all think of her? That she was mad, perhaps. They might justly think so. Had not her conduct been such as to lead them to this conclusion? Oh! when once it was all told, Earny felt it would be a great relief; but she could not summon courage to tell it. Yet, ere three more weeks were passed, it must be told, or their marriage again postponed.

That was an alternative she would not dwell upon. She pushed the thought far from her, and getting out of bed, lighted her candle, and opening her writing-case, quickly wrote a few hurried lines, and directed and sealed the note ere her intention had time to change.

This done, she placed it under her pillow, and with a slight feeling of relief at having taken one step forward, fell into a troubled sleep.

Mrs. Dalton looked very sad as she returned Earny's loving kiss the next morning. She could not forget the incident of the previous evening—her child had never treated her so before. She, as well as Mr. Montravers, wondered what it could mean.

Earny observed the sadness of her mamma's manner, and too well understood the cause. She could not bear that there should be even the appearance of a difference between them now—they who had never differed from each other all their lives. And, sending Minnie into the next room to prepare her lessons, she threw her arms round Mrs. Dalton's neck, exclaiming, "Oh! mamma, mamma! you must forgive me. I cannot bear to lose your love now!"

"Why should you, dearest?" asked her mamma, as she parted back the hair from Earny's pale forehead. "You know not, my child, how dearly I love you."

"I know you did, mamma; but I was very rude last night. I knew not what I was doing. I did not mean to thrust your hand aside."

"I never thought you meant to do anything unkind, my child; that letter upset you. Will you not tell me what its contents were? You say it concerned only yourself," she continued, as Earny did not speak. "Have not I an interest in all that?"

"Yes, mamma, a great interest in all that letter spoke of. I was wrong in saying that it concerned only myself. You shall know all, mamma, but not now—not to-day, at least. Spare me your love for a short time longer. I cannot part with it yet," and Earny's tone grew beseeching.

"Earny dearest, I cannot understand you. What should make you think that there is any danger of your losing my love? Mr. Montravers may claim all yours, but he can never take mine from you."

"Oh, mamma, it is not that; that is not all," burst in convulsive sobs from Earny's lips. "You will not love me the less because I am his; but there is another thing. How do I know that you will love me any longer as you have done, when you know all," and Earny's tears fell fast, very fast.

"My child; you frighten me. Tell me what is this dreadful thing that you have done which is great enough to cause you to forfeit a mother's love. Tell me quickly, Earny; you frighten me!"

"Not to-day, mamma. Oh! ask me not to-day nor to-morrow; but the day after you shall know all. Oh, promise me, mamma, to love me still."

"Earny, my own dearest Earny, how can you speak so? Whatever you have done; whatever you may do, you are my own dearest loving child, and nought can ever draw my love from you; but this suspense is more than I can bear. If you have

anything dreadful to tell me, let me know at once dearest—the reality cannot be worse.”

“I have promised to do so soon, mamma. Will you not wait until the day after to-morrow? Oh, do, mamma. It may be the last favour your child will ever ask you. Mamma! mamma! promise me that you will.”

“I will try to wait, dearest, if you so much wish it, until then; but not longer. I could not bear the suspense many hours. It would kill me!”

“Let us sit together as we are now, mamma, all the morning. Let my head rest here on your lap, and place your hand upon it; its touch soothes me. I am so tired, I think I could sleep.”

Mrs. Dalton did as her child requested; and, worn out with excitement, Earny thus fell asleep.

They had remained thus for a long time, when Mr. Montravers came in. His knock had not disturbed Earny. She was sleeping soundly; and seating himself in the chair opposite, he employed his time in watching her, wondering much at finding her in this position at such an early hour in the day.

Presently a thought seemed to strike him, and, coming softly over to Mrs. Dalton, he inquired if she were ill.

“Not yet; though I am much afraid she will be,” she replied. Then, as something seemed to rush through her mind, she asked, abruptly, looking up

to Mr. Montravers, "Have you and Earny quarrelled?"

"No! Why? What makes you ask such a question?" said he, with a look of amazement, and, forgetting for the minute, all that had concerned Captain Macclaughton.

"Because, I do not know why, but I thought you might have done so;" and as Mr. Montravers looked at her as if requiring further explanation, she motioned to him to seat himself beside her, and, in a tone sufficiently low, not to disturb Earnestine, related to him their morning's conversation.

He said he could give no solution of the mystery to Mrs. Dalton. He was as much in the dark respecting it as herself; but as he sat there brooding over it, dark thoughts of Captain Macclaughton arose in his mind, and he felt convinced that in some way or other he was concerned in it.

He dared not mention his suspicions to Mrs. Dalton. How could he, with no stronger ground to stand upon than that one walk; and, if Earny had not thought proper to mention this to her mamma, was it for him to do so, he asked himself. Certainly not. They must wait until the time Earny had fixed, and she would explain all. Oh! that she might be able to it satisfactorily.

He looked at her sleeping so quietly there, and decided that there was no shade of hypocrisy in that countenance; nought but truth seemed stamped



upon it ; but there was a painful contraction of the forehead, and a drawn look about the mouth, that it grieved him to see. It spoke too plainly of pain, either mental or physical.

She slept long ; and when at last she awoke, she looked up with her usually bright smile at finding herself in her low position. Then, as memory returned, the smile faded, and rising with a languid air, she offered her hand to Mr. Montravers.

He took it and pressed it, all suspicions had for the time faded, and laughing at her being so very lazy, he asked her to take a walk with him.

But she declined, saying she was tired, which was really true, and, indeed, she looked so ; but the real reason was that she had resolved not to be separated from her mamma, not for one moment, if she could help it, during these two last days—the only ones perhaps in which Mrs. Dalton would ever again call her her own loving child.

## CHAPTER IX.

THE fever which had laid so many low at Wickhamstead began to abate. The family in Baslees Court had all recovered; thanks to Miss Vickers and Mary Jinks' unwearying care and attention; and the mother declared she was more set up than she had been for months, ever since the father died, and there was scarcely a poor family in all Wickhamstead who had not something to say in praise of the kindest of ladies, in the queer-looking bonnet. Mothers blessed her; and fathers doffed their hats and taught their children to do the same, wherever she went, and Miss Vickers almost wondered that they should all love her so much. She had but done for them what she was sure any of them would do for her. Why should they make such a fuss about it?

Mrs. Montravers had returned to the Grange, and Nannette was looking forward to the pleasure of showing off at the bridal party. She had per-

suaded her mamma to buy her, on their way home, a most expensive silk dress, and, what was considered by all her friends, a gem of a bonnet. She had not obtained it though without much coaxing, for Mrs. Montravers said it was needless to spend much money on such an affair as this. Were her son going to make a suitable match, the case would be different; but Nannette coaxed, and had her way, and persuaded herself she should look very bewitching.

The bridesmaids' dresses were plain white tarletans, with white cashmere cloaks, and white chip bonnets, ornamented with a few sprigs of heather. They were Grace's choice, and met with unanimous approval at the cottage.

Few alterations had to be made at the Grange, for it had been put into good repair about eighteen months previously, before Grace and her mamma came to reside at Wickhamstead, and those few were to be made during Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Montravers's tour on the Continent, when his mother and Nannette had left for Cricklewood. Grace was to wait there to welcome the travellers home, and then she was going to spend some time with some friends in Derbyshire.

All these arrangements had been subjected to Earnestine's approval, and she had willingly acquiesced in them; but not with the zest that Grace considered they deserved. She was certainly much changed since first her little sister Minnie

introduced her to her acquaintance. Grace thought her much altered, yet still she loved her dearly, and meant soon to have her for a sister.

The two days passed ; and that on which Earny had promised to reveal all, dawned at length. She had nerved herself to the task, and meant to keep her word ; but at times the desire that she had never seen Hurst Park grew so strong within her, that it was with difficulty she could finish dressing.

Breakfast was over ; and Mrs. Dalton, instead of going into the kitchen to give her orders as she generally did the first thing in the morning, loitered about the room, hoping Earnestine would begin the much-desired information ; but far from doing so, she seemed to be particularly intent on Minnie's lessons, and, as Mrs. Dalton thought, took great care that the child should find no excuse for leaving the room. Earny had promised to tell her, therefore, she would do so ; and Mrs. Dalton tried to be patient.

After giving cook her orders, she again looked into the room ; but Minnie was reading " Aunt Ann's History of England " aloud, and she closed the door again without interrupting them.

It was not until twelve o'clock, when Mrs. Dalton heard Minnie's voice in the garden, that she again went in.

Earny was standing by the window as her mamma entered, her arm on the window-frame, and her cheek resting on her hand. She was looking very pale and thoughtful, but her eyes were clear and bright.

"This is the day after to-morrow, dearest. Have you forgotten?" said Mrs. Dalton, as she approached the window.

"Oh no, mamma; I could not do that. I am ready;" and she looked towards Mrs. Dalton's favourite chair.

Mrs. Dalton understood that she wished her to occupy it, and seating herself in it, Earny placed herself in her old position, at her mother's feet, her head resting on her lap.

For some minutes neither of them spoke, and no sound was heard in the room, save the ticking of the clock on the mantle-piece, and the beating of Mrs. Dalton's heart.

"What have you to tell me, my child?" asked Mrs. Dalton at length. "Do not be afraid. A mother's love is strong; it can bear anything."

"I know it, mamma," she said. Her voice was firm; but she held Mrs. Dalton's hand tightly in her own, as if the pressure of it would nerve her to the task she had undertaken. "A mother's love is strong—very strong—yet that can never bind us two together again, for, mamma, I am, I am not your child!"

It was told, told at last, the secret that Earny had been bearing alone for so many, many months, until its weight had become almost insupportable. It was told, and Earny breathed more freely, and, with

her head in its old position, she sat perfectly still, waiting for Mrs. Dalton to speak.

But Mrs. Dalton spoke not; the words Earny had uttered conveyed no meaning to her mind. She heard them, it is true, but they were senseless to her. Gradually the perception of what Earny wished her to understand dawned forth out of the mist, and with it a clearer, stronger feeling of fear, and liberating her hand from the firm grasp in which it was held, placed it on Earny's brow, and with the other clasped her wrist, saying,

"Does it ache very much, dearest? Is your throat sore?" and, without waiting for a reply, stretched out her arm to ring the bell, when Earny prevented her.

"Stop, mamma," she said, again taking the hand in her own; "there is no necessity for sending for Dr. Biggs; I am not ill. I see you think that my mind is wandering; it is not so; what I tell you is true. I am not your child; she lies under the old beech-tree at Hurst Park, and I ——"

Earny stopped.

"And you? speak, Earny. Whose?"

"Lady Dexham's!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The clock on the mantle-piece had struck one—the minute hand pointed to a quarter past, and Earny grew restless. Several times had she paced

the room and strained her eyes to see if aught was approaching the house; but nought came, and she threw herself once more into a seat. Mrs. Dalton was sitting, pale and bewildered where Earny had left her, and neither of them spoke.

At length carriage-wheels approached, and Earny grew a shade paler as nearer and nearer they came.

"Are they come?"

"Yes, mamma."

A knock was heard at the hall-door, and scarcely was it closed again, when another followed; then Mrs. Dalton and Earny went out to meet Earny's invited guests—Lord and Lady Dexham, Mr. Montravers, Mr. Wilmot, and Sarah Tibs.

Few words were said, for perplexity sat on the face of each, on all save Earny's.

"The train was late, was it not?" she asked, offering her hand to Mr. Wilmot.

"Yes, rather; I was afraid you would think we were not coming. Shall I give you the letters?"

"Not until I ask you for them. Will you take a seat?" she placed one for him at the top of the table, and two more for Lord and Lady Dexham at bottom, and then assisted Sarah Tibs to remove Lady Dexham's bonnet and shawl.

"You will go up-stairs presently," she said; "or will you prefer going now? Mr. Wilmot, I understand, must leave by the next train."

"Yes, dear. What is all this about? Do let us

know at once. What have you brought us here for? Is anything dreadful the matter?"

Earny did not answer, but going round to the other side of the table, she placed herself by Mr. Montravers's side, close to Mrs. Dalton.

They all looked at her with surprise, she was so pale, so calm and collected, while making all these preparations, that Lord and Lady Dexham could not conceive what was going to happen.

"Mr. Wilmot," she said, in a clear, firm voice; "you have some papers in your possession directed to me, will you please place them on the table, and at the same time say in what way you obtained them."

Mr. Wilmot put his hand into his coat pocket, and drawing out a thick packet, directed to Miss Dalton, placed it, as she had requested him, on the table, and began—

"Somewhere about nine months ago—I cannot say exactly, but it was just at the time that your lordship gave the children their school-feast—hearing that a poor old woman of the name of Green, living in my parish, was very ill, I went to visit her, and saw her several times. I found from repeated conversation with her that she had something preying on her mind, but what it was she refused to tell me. A few hours before her death I was sitting with her when this young lady," pointing, as he spoke, to Earnestine, "came in, and the old woman



I thought, appeared much agitated. We had not been very long together before Sarah Tibs joined us, and then pulling a paper, or rather two, from under her pillow, she exclaimed, 'I have done it; get them signed.' She then requested Miss Dalton to hand her a pen and ink, which was on the table, and motioning to Sarah Tibs and myself to come near, Miss Dalton said,

" 'Will you, please, witness this signature?'

" 'We did so, and wrote our names as witnesses.

The old woman was getting very faint, but we heard her say distinctly, 'Everything that is written in those papers is true, I swear it.' She then folded them up, and I was requested to seal them with my seal, which I did. She then further requested me to direct one to Lady Dexham and the other to Mrs. Dalton; the woman then took them from my hand, and giving them to Miss Dalton, said 'they are yours; do with them what you will.' She took them, and enclosing them both in this paper you see before you, requested me to direct it to herself, to seal it, and keep it safely in my possession till she asked for it, which I have done. On Tuesday last I wrote to her, saying that as I was going on the Continent for some months, I should feel more comfortable if she would either allow me to bring them to her, to place in her own keeping, or send some one to fetch them. In reply, Miss Dalton said she would be much obliged if I would bring them

myself, as she might want me to swear to the signature. She requested me to show the note to Lord and Lady Dexham, and to press them to accompany me, with Sarah Tibs. I did so. I hope I have given my explanation clearly."

No one had spoken; no one had interrupted him, but each had sat with their eyes fixed on him, as it were, drinking in his words, wondering to what they would lead.

As he sat down, Earny said, "Quite, I think;" and she looked at Lord Dexham for him to corroborate her assertion.

"Perfectly, my dear, as far as it goes; but in what way this can possibly concern us I am at a loss to discover."

"These papers will tell you," she said, and breaking the seal of the outer case, she unfolded it, and taking out two sealed letters, placed one in Mrs. Dalton's hand, the other she passed to Lady Dexham.

"I believe one is nearly a *fac-simile* of the other," said Earny, as Lady Dexham and Mrs. Dalton each broke a seal. "Perhaps some one will read one aloud."

Mrs. Dalton's hand trembled so much that she knew she could not command her voice sufficiently to make it intelligible; so putting the paper into Mr. Wilmot's hand, she said—

"Will you read it to us? I fear I cannot."

"Certainly," he said; "unless Lord Dexham would prefer doing so."

"No, sir; no, read on please. I want to know what it all means."

Every eye was fixed on him with eager curiosity, as he commenced

**"WIDOW GREEN'S CONFESSION."**

"My name is not Green, as people call me, but Benfield" [Lord Dexham passed his fingers through his hair, a habit he had when thinking; he had some indistinct remembrance of having heard that name before, but where, he could not tell]. "Years and years ago, I did a very wicked thing. I am very sorry for it now, but I was provoked to it. My husband died, and left me a widow. I had one son, and he I was very fond of. He was almost the only body who has cared for me. Well, he grew up a bit wild, and took to poaching, and one night he goes off and catches some hares on Mr. Molesworth's property—this is, he as is Lord Dexham now, but then, he were only plain Mr. Molesworth—and they caught him, and sent him to prison. Oh, I begged so hard that they wouldn't do it! I promised to work hard, and pay the price of all he had took, but they wouldn't listen to me. I begged 'em on my very knees to give me my boy back, but they said they must make an example of him, and they did; and then I vowed a vow that I'd have vengeance on them as did me this wrong; but I

could find no means, no how. Well, their eldest child, a son, died, and it did me good to think that that they had lost it; but, 'twasn't enough for me—I weren't satisfied. They had another son, and then a daughter; and when the daughter was about a month old, they wanted a nurse for it, and then a thought struck me that my time for vengeance was come. I knew a young woman, a friend of mine, who wanted a place, and I sent her to ask for the situation, and she got it. Her name was Elizabeth Lovain."

Lord and Lady Dexham remembered all these facts quite well; to what were they to lead?

Mr. Montravers was by no means enlightened. The name, the only name that he was waiting for in connexion with this mystery about Earny, had not yet been pronounced. Doubtless it would come soon, namely, that of Captain Macclaughton.

"Well, about a week before this, as I walking home to Bradiford, I had met a young woman carrying a sweet little baby in her arms, and I asked her whose it was, and she said a lady's who had come to lodge at a farmhouse, about a mile and a half from Bradiford. After this, I met her several times, and hearing that the lady was sickly, I used to go over to the farm to inquire for her.

"Well, Elizabeth Lovain had been to see me once, and had brought Mrs. Molesworth's baby with her; and, dear me! she and the baby at the farm

were as like as two twins for aught I could see. All except a shade in the eye, which no one would notice without comparing them; and glad enough I was of it for it greatly favoured my plans.

“ One day as I was walking out I met the young woman from the farm; and she told me they was going home in a week, and I saw I had no time to waste.

“ So I up and sends my duty to the lady at the farm—I can’t remember her name no how—and asks her if she’ll please let me give baby—I had taken, I said, such a liking to it—a curious kind of cradle which my husband had brought home years ago from ’Merica, and if she’d do me the honour of letting her accept it, would the young woman come and fetch it, and be sure to bring the baby with her for me to kiss it once more. Then I goes up to Elizabeth Lovain’s mother, who lives a top of the village of Bradiford, determined to get her to make some excuse for sending her daughter to see me the next day with the baby. I had but just got in and was asking for her, when her mother says, ‘ I ’spects to zee her to-morrow; she is coming out for a few hours, but she can’t come without the baby, because the other nurse is ill; and her mistress is gone up to London to see some relation who is dying.’ I was like to drop—this was just what I wanted. So I says, ‘ maybe she’d like to have a little time to herself. Tell her to bring me the baby, I’ll nurse

it.' They thought 'twas very kind of me to offer, and said they'd do it. So I went home. I was terrible afraid that the young woman from the farm wouldn't come, and I lied awake all night thinking about it. The next morning it rained, and I thought everything would be undone. Then, by-and-by it brightened up, and awful glad I was to see the young woman from the farm coming across the fields with the baby. Well, she came in, and I show'd her the cradle, and much she admired it. I was thinking how I could send her away a little while without the baby when she says she must be off; she can't stay because she has to buy some things at the other end of the village, to carry home with her. So I begs her to leave the baby till she com'd back, I'd take care of it for her; but she said 'twould be a troubling me; but I said 'twouldn't, and I thought 'twould rain. The next minute I wished I had a bitten my tongue, for she said, if so, she must go straight home with the baby. Then I looked out and said the wind didn't blow where I thought it did; 'twouldn't rain; 'twas a mistake of mine; and then she left me the baby. Oh! how I wished Elizabeth Lovain would come! I feared the other would be back first. Well, it didn't happen so, for I saw her coming; and, popping the farm baby into my bed, I ran out to meet her; and, taking the child from her arms, sent her back quick to her mother's. Then in I ran. Didn't my heart

beat! I had got 'em both there; my time was come. I goes to my drawer, and takes out a little bottle as my husband brought years ago from 'Merica; and I took the Molesworth baby, and pricked four or five little dots between two of its little toes, as I had seen my husband do on his arm; and then, quick as thought, I undresses them both, and puts the clothes that the Molesworth baby had on, on the farm baby, and what the farm baby wore I put on the Molesworth baby, and so I changed 'em. [The perspiration was standing in large drops on Lord Dexham's face; Lady Dexham's almost rivalled Earny's in its whiteness. It was not clear to them yet.] I had but just finished dressing them when the young woman from the farm came back. The moment I caught sight of her, I put her baby, which, thank my stars, was very quiet, into my bed in the inner room, and packed her off quick with the Molesworth baby and the cradle. I was terrible afeared the other child would cry before she was gone; and a fine hubbub it set up almost before she had got out of the house. I was awful hot when Elizabeth Lovain came to fetch it; and said she was sorry I had been so worrited with it; she s'posed it was hungry; and so I s'pose it was; and so she took the farm baby home to Mrs. Molesworth's, and nobody, as I heard, noticed the difference; for, as I said, the other nurse was ill, and Mrs. Molesworth was kept in London for pretty

nearly a month, and ever since it has been brought up as her child ; and nobody but myself knows it isn't, 'cepting Elizabeth Lovain. I never told her for years afterwards, till I fell in with her among the gipsies as was prowling about in the neighbourhood. Where she is now I don't know. She told me she was going with the tribe off to foreign parts. But what is written here is all true ; I swear to it. When the family came to the title and moved here to Hurst Park, I came too ; but I had kept out of their sight for years, though I had always kept near them, and called myself Green ; and so there was no fear of their knowing who I was, or, if they did, they never knew that I had done them any harm. I meant to have said nothing about it to any one until her as was called Miss Molesworth was grown up and going to be married : and then, when she was all dressed and in the church, I meant to stand forward and prove that she was not their child."

That this was intended to prove that their own dear Clara was a changeling, Lord and Lady Dexham now clearly perceived. Mr. Montravers saw that also ; but how could it affect Earny ? Could the farm child have been Captain Macclaughton's, and did Earny know it. How absurd ! Captain Macclaughton was but a boy at that time.

" I put that mark upon the real Miss Molesworth that I might know her again when I wanted her, but I have quite forgotten her name ; but I have



saved some money to advertise for her. I have put all this down upon paper, because I am getting ill, and I don't know what may happen."

"The hand-writing here changes," said Mr. Wilmot, pausing to look up, "and becomes almost illegible."

"Pray go on," said Lady Dexham. "I can scarcely read a word of what is before me." Mr. Wilmot continued:

"I have found the real Miss Molesworth. I have seen her several times, but I did not know who she was, though I thought I had somewhere heard the name; and she has been very kind to me, and forgiven me for the wicked wrong I did her. I pray ye all to forgive me. 'Twas yesterday, only yesterday, I found out who she was. She had been to the school-rooms a dressing them up. When going back to Hurst Park it began to pelt of rain, and she com'd in to see me. I thought, at first, she had come a purpose; but she told me afterwards she hadn't. Well, I liked her, and I did not want her to get cold, and so I gets her to pull off her shoes and stockings, and I rubbed her feet in the blanket, and then, as I was doing it, all a' once, I saw the very mark atween the toes as I had put there when she was a baby. I most fainted; but I didn't say anything about it then, only I begged her to come again last night, and she did come, and then I questioned her about the cradle; and when I

found she had got it at home, I gives her what I had written of this first part to read, and then she couldn't understand it until I told her that she wasn't really Miss Dalton; that Miss Dalton was living up at Hurst Park, and that she was the real Miss Molesworth. And so she is. Her name is Earnestine Molesworth, for she wasn't christened when I changed her.

(Signed) "MARTHA JANE BENFIELD.

Witnesses:—

"CHARLES WILMOT, of the parish of Hurst, clerk.

"SARAH TIBS, needlewoman and nurse, of the same place."

The paper was scarcely finished, when the exclamation

"Earnestine! Is it you?" burst from the lips of Lord and Lady Dexham simultaneously.

Mr. Montravers staggered. "Was this the reason that she had so often postponed being his wife? Dared she not marry one neither her equal by birth nor in fortune? Was she lost to him again? Captain Macclaughton was her cousin. Had she not a right to take his arm? he to press her hand? What must she have thought of him when he acted so madly as to presume to question her about it."

All these thoughts rushed through his mind, as it were, in a minute, and pale and dejected he leant against the table for support.


"Yes, I believe so," said Earny, in answer to

Lord and Lady Dexham's question ; and, going to the closet in which Minnie kept her playthings, she took out the cradle and placed it upon the table, saying, as she looked at Mrs. Dalton, "Mamma,"—the word came so naturally she could not discontinue it—"mamma! How did I get this cradle?"

Mrs. Dalton's voice trembled very much as she replied, "Everything that is said in that paper concerning the lady and baby staying at the farm near Bradiford, and the giving of the cradle, is quite true. I stayed there for my health, when my baby was about six weeks old. I remember the woman well, and also, that on our return home from the farm, my remarking to the nurse, how much the child had altered during the few days that I had been too much occupied to pay as much attention to it as usual ; but, as in an hour or so afterwards she began to show symptoms of measles, I attributed it to that. Oh, would that it were not so;" and Mrs. Dalton, throwing her arms around Earny, pressed her to her heart, exclaiming, "for I have lost my child!"

"And we have gained one then, if this be true?" said Lady Dexham, trying to clear herself of her bewilderment. "And our dear Clara was not ours. Oh! Earnestine. How long have you known this? Did you tell her?"

"Never!" Earny was going to say more; but Mr. Wilmot, looking at his watch, asked if they



would, excuse him, as "he was afraid he should lose the train, and it was of great importance that he should be at home that evening."

No one had thought of offering him any refreshment; and Mrs. Dalton, with many apologies, begged him to wait just for a few minutes; but he declined, saying he would take something at the refreshment-room on the road; adding, as he shook hands with them all, and pointed to the paper, lying where he had placed it—"That 'Charles Wilmot' is my writing. I am one of the witnesses to that signature. Sarah Tibs, sitting there, is the other;" and the next moment he was gone.

With strict injunctions to be silent respecting anything she had just heard, Sarah Tibs was sent into the garden to play with Minnie, and many were the inquiries Earnestine was subjected to from all save Mr. Montravers. He said nothing, but stood partly listening to Earny's recital, as she explained how, when Widow Green had made her comprehend what that paper meant, she had requested her to add what she liked to it, and then, if possible, to make another copy of it, which, with much difficulty, she had done; and how, for Clara's sake as well as her own, and she looked at Mrs. Dalton, she had said nothing about it. Clara had been so happy in her home, and was so glad that she had not been born in a state of life to earn her own living, which Earny had expected to do; and then her doubt about

what was right when Clara was going to be married, and how she had so much wished for Clara to come to Wickhamstead, that she might know her own mamma, and that Mrs. Dalton might know her and love her.

Mr. Montravers partly listened to all this, and much more, and was partly occupied with his own thoughts.

Miss Molesworth, with her seventy thousand pounds, was still alive, and Captain Macclaughton also. When he heard of this, might he not try his skill here? If the marriage were again postponed, which most probably it would be, of course he was dependent now on Lord and Lady Dexham. What would they say to his having her at all? They had been most kind to him as the wooer of Miss Dalton, would they be equally so as that of Miss Molesworth, their daughter, with her seventy thousand pounds? Would that Captain Macclaughton had had the money, if that were to stand between them! They could not think that he had sought her for that. He was engaged to her even before she paid that visit to Hurst Park. This was one comfortable thought, and then came another.

Earny had said to him in the morning he had acted like a madman. "Vernon, if ever you should hear anything of me, anything that will perhaps account to you in your own mind for my wishing to delay the fulfilment of your hopes, re-

member that that is the time that I shall desire to have them fulfilled. Remember this, it may be a comfort to you."

Was this what she meant? Had she foreseen his doubts, and taken this delicate way of trying to remove them? If so, good, kind Earny! She was dearer to him than his life!

Lord and Lady Dexham and Mrs. Dalton finished questioning, and Earny rose from the chair on which she had been sitting by Mrs. Dalton, and going over to the other side of the room, where Mr. Montravers was sitting, placed herself by his side, saying,

"I have something more to tell you all. Will you listen a few minutes?"

They all looked at her.

"I am going to tell you, because I hear it has been talked about, and therefore you ought to know it. I am very sorry it happened," and Earny's face grew crimson.

"You remember, Lady Dexham, that on our way back from the school-feast, at my request, you left me at Widow Green's cottage, and that Captain Macclaughton offered to fetch me?"

"Yes, dear."

Mr. Montravers listened intently. What was coming?

"You know I explained how it was that I was kept so late. It was late when we left the cottage;

it was directly after she had shown me that paper, and I believe my senses were nearly gone—at least, I was thinking so much of all she had said, that I scarcely knew I was walking home, nor who was with me. I indistinctly remember Captain Macclaughton offering me his arm, and I believe I took it, as I know I had to cling to something to help me on, I felt so faint; but I remember nothing else, until just as we came near the house, some sound startled me—I think it was the rustling of some dead leaves; and then I found that Captain Macclaughton was holding my hand, and I heard him say (Earny's voice trembled violently, but she was determined to tell it), 'Earnestine, my dearest love, I would marry you if I could. I love you ten times better than silly little Clara, but I can't afford it.'"

"The scoundrel!" escaped from Mr. Montrovers's lips.

"The vile, false, deceitful villain!" exclaimed Lord Dexham. "We have found out since he went away that he is enormously in debt, and he had the insolence to tell his tailor and lots of his other creditors, that all their demands should be settled as soon as he was married. With my daughter's money, indeed! Thank God! she died first!" and Lord Dexham stamped on the ground in his fury.

"But knowing that, Earny," and Lord Dexham's

eyes glared as he looked at her, "would you have allowed Clara to marry him?"

"Yes," replied Earny, as she steadily returned his look; "I believe I should; I knew not what was right to be done; I could ask no one. Dearest Clara, I knew, loved Captain Macclaughton with her whole heart; nothing could shake her trust in him. I could not have repeated what he said to me, without giving you some reason for my abstraction, and the truth would have been dreadful to Clara; besides, he would have denied it—he may do so now, perhaps—and I don't think I should have prevented their marriage; but had it taken place while she lived, you would never have heard what you have heard to-day; you would not have been told now, only"—she paused, then summoning courage, continued—"only, I am engaged to Mr. Montravers. I was not sure that the marriage would be legal if, knowing that my name was not Dalton, I signed it as such, and I had but one alternative—either to give him up, or to have this made right, and I preferred the latter. Will you not tell me that you approve my choice?"

"Certainly, dearest Earny," said Lady Dexham, while her husband held out his hand to Mr. Montravers. "You are a dear, self-denying girl. Here have we been sitting questioning you until you look positively worn out, and never thought once of all you have suffered in your love




to dear darling Clara. Earny, you have acted nobly; you would have sacrificed your happiness to another. I am proud to own you as my child. Mrs. Dalton, I can never repay you for making her what she is, never!"

"Clara was a sweet girl," replied Mrs. Dalton, feeling that she must say something, though tears streamed down her cheeks, as she heard Lady Dexham claim Earny as her child.

"And we have no more right to the grave under the old beech tree," said Lady Dexham, turning to her husband, and Mrs. Dalton's were not the only tears then shed.

"Yes," said Lord Dexham, as soon as he could speak, "I planted the flowers that grow upon it, and I must lay claim to the right of gathering one sometimes; and Mrs. Dalton, listen." (Earny's arm was around her, they both looked up.) "What I am going to say I am sure my wife will consider only right. As long as dear Clara lived, she was ours, thanks to Earny's love, and I cannot feel that I have any right to come now and rob you of one who has been to you as a dear, loving daughter; therefore, let everything remain as it was, in all save one thing—money. Whatever is wanted in that way, I claim a father's right to give her. She has our love already, but in everything else she is yours, unless," he added, with an attempt at a smile, "unless you choose to give her to Mr.



Montravers, if you should fancy that, my consent is wanted to that; I give it, with pleasure; I know no one whom I should be more proud to call my son."

"Thank you, dear Lord Dexham," said Earny, going up to him, and, for the first time in her life, voluntarily offering him a kiss. "Thank you very much for not objecting to my liking her best. I love you both very much, you have always been very kind to me; but I love her more, I really cannot help it."

"Your father would be ashamed to own you for his child if you did not, dear Earny; really all this is so new to me, that I hardly know if I am awake or dreaming. Mr. Montravers, if Mrs. Dalton gives her to you, you must take great care of her, or you will be called to an account, I can tell you"

The next day Lord Dexham could not imagine what he had done to his fingers, they felt as if they had been enclosed in a vice.

## CHAPTER X.

MR. MONTRAVERS went home early. He thought Lord and Lady Dexham might prefer being alone with Mrs. Dalton and Earny.

The tea was on the table when he reached the Grange, and his mother with Grace and Nannette were just commencing; he took a seat beside them and drank his tea, speaking scarcely a word. Grace saw that something was the matter with him, but what she could not divine, his manner was so peculiar; he did not seem to be pained or angry, but there was an expression on his face that she could not make out.

"Shall we have some music?" said she, as soon as the tea had been removed, looking at her brother.

"No, thank you; not unless you or Nannette particularly wish for it, otherwise I don't think we will have any to-night. I am rather tired."

"What have you been doing?" asked Nannette; "but there, I need not inquire, we all know where

the great attraction lies. Has she been trying on her wreath?"

"How stupid you were, Grace, to choose bonnets. If I were going to be bridesmaid, which I think I ought, I should wear a coloured wreath and a veil."

"You must wait for that until you are a bride," replied her sister.

"That is sensible of you, certainly, Grace! Who ever heard of a bride wearing a coloured wreath? Bridesmaids do; don't you think they would look pretty, mamma?"

"Yes, but very out of place at such an affair as this. Grace showed more sense than I expected in choosing everything plain."

"I don't see that at all, mamma; if the poor girl cannot afford to dress well at other times, there is all the more reason for her wishing to do so at her wedding; besides, she is to be our sister-in-law, and therefore ought to have everything that is proper."

"Sisters-in-law are but very distant relations, Nannette; indeed, I have often wondered that they are considered relations at all; it is not like an aunt or uncle, or even a third cousin."

"But she will be your daughter, mamma."

"My daughter-in-law, Nannette, but that is quite as distant as a sister-in-law; quite as much so."

"Then, mamma, if I marry a lord, you will not consider him to be any relation of yours?" said Nannette, with a mischievous glance at her sister.

"How absurd and pert you are, Nannette! I was not talking of you; you quite forget yourself. I did not know that you were so particularly fond of this Miss Dalton."

"I don't dislike her, only she is so much beneath us."

"Her father was an officer in the army, Nannette," said Grace, somewhat sharply.

"So are lots of governesses' fathers, but they have to earn their living. Lady Moreton had a general's daughter for her governess, before she came to school."

"You are right, Nannette," said Mrs. Montravers, as if in direct contradiction to Grace; "she is indeed beneath us."

"Mother," said Mr. Montravers, who had previously taken no part in the conversation; "long ago, when I first told you of my engagement to Miss Dalton, you upbraided me with it, and hoped that something would occur to prevent our marriage. Are you still of the same mind? I know you cannot bear her, but have you still a wish that it should be broken off?"

"It is too far gone for that, Vernon; I wish to my heart it could be done."

"Then your wish is granted. I can never marry Miss Dalton. Miss Dalton is dead!"

"Dead!" exclaimed Mrs. Montravers. "Dead!" echoed Grace and Nannette, and Grace turned pale. Mr. Montravers had no fear of frightening his mother nor Nannette; they did not care enough for Earny to be affected by it; but Grace he knew would be almost overwhelmed by such news; and stooping as if to pick up something on the carpet near her, he managed to whisper so that the others did not hear him: "It is all right, Grace; Earny is not dead." Grace could not reconcile his two speeches, but she saw he did not look unhappy, and this satisfied her.

"Yes, dead!" repeated Mr. Montravers, standing up again; "say you are glad, mother;" and there was the slightest bit of sarcasm in his tone; he could not help it.

"No, I am not glad she is dead, Vernon, so far as that goes, but this really is a release for you, I see you think so yourself." There was gladness in Mrs. Montravers's tone.

"Then listen, mother, and let me again ask you if you are glad. I am engaged to the Honourable Miss Molesworth, only daughter of Lord and Lady Dexam, of Hurst Park."

"Are you mad? She is dead!"

"Miss Dalton is dead. The young lady whom you have known as Miss Earnestine Dalton, whom

you have upbraided, slighted, scoffed at; whom you considered to be too inferior to be the wife of your son, is in reality the Honourable Earnestine Molesworth, only daughter of Lord and Lady Dexham, of Hurst Park."

It was well that there was a vacant chair close behind Mrs. Montravers, otherwise in all probability the floor would have received her.

"What do you mean?" she gasped out.

"What I have said, mother. Shall I break it off now?"

"How you have deceived me! Why did you not tell me so before?"

"I did not know it until to-day. Grace is as much astonished as yourself."

"How did you find it out? How did it happen?"

Mr. Montravers gave his mother a few of the facts, and then Grace had the whole recital to herself afterwards.

"Oh, Vernon!" she said, when she had heard all.

"Are you not glad that she acted so nobly? It is just like her."

"It is indeed; she is worth worlds to me. But Grace, I would just as soon she had remained Miss Dalton."

"So would I," said Grace; "but she is herself still."

Lord and Lady Dexham remained the night with Mrs. Dalton and Earny; and heard all the

particulars of the wedding, which was to be a very quiet one. They had previously declined attending it, as under the circumstances they feared it would be almost too much for them; but now, Lord Dexham said, if it was to be such a very quiet affair, he thought he must come, if Mrs. Dalton would allow him to assist her in giving Earny to Mr. Montravers, as it was too much for her to undertake herself; and he thought he could do it as well as Dr. Biggs, who had promised his services. So they were to come the day before.

"And may we bring Reginald?" asked Lady Dexham.

"He is your brother, Earny," exclaimed Mrs. Dalton. It was the first moment that this truth had dawned upon her, and sad though she felt, she could not forbear smiling as the recollection of Earny's aversion to him occurred to her mind.

"I have accustomed myself to think of him as such," said Earny, rightly interpreting Mrs. Dalton's smile; "I wonder what he will think of me?"

"What he has always done, Earny dear, as the much valued friend of his wife, and much loved sister."

This sentence recalled too painfully all that had happened at Hurst Park nearly four months ago; and the subject was changed.



When Earny retired to her room for the night, she asked Lady Dexham to come in for a few minutes ; and pulling off her stocking, showed her the marks between her toes put there by Widow Green, and for the appearance of which Mrs. Dalton had never been able to account.

Lord and Lady Dexham left early the next morning.

Earny told Mrs. Dalton they had by no means realized the fact that she was their child.

" And oh! mamma," she continued, " is it not kind of them not to wish to take me from you? It makes me love them ten times more than I did before."

" Very kind," replied Mrs. Dalton; " and now, Earny, instead of your asking me to love you, I must ask you to love me."

" Mamma, you do not mean it. You know it would be impossible for me to love you more than I do; and when I live at the Grange you will be near me still. Shall we not be happy, mamma?"

Earny could think and talk of happiness now; the secret that had been preying upon her mind for so long, marring her every enjoyment, coming between everything she held most dear, was told. Its weight was gone, and her mamma was still left to her, and she felt more like the Earny of old than she had done for so many, many months.

But Mrs. Dalton could not so easily recover the

severe shock she had received from Earny's intelligence; she could not forget that she had no legal right to call her her child. She felt how very, very kind it was of Lord Dexham to allow everything to remain as it was; but it could never make Earny really her own again.

Mr. Montravers came, and he was satisfied now. There was no lack of joy at his appearance; no tearful eyes, no avoiding of his glance, and he was happy. Need we say that he told her so? Delightful was that afternoon's walk, and pleasant the evening spent at the cottage, with Grace to keep them company. How they talked of all that had occurred during the last eighteen months. How Earny had been content to let Clara act as the young mistress of Hurst Park, while she stood by as her humble friend. And how patient and good Mr. Montravers had been; and Earny was told how Grace had always fought her battles for her. It was a pleasant evening, indeed! for all that was said was true, and Mrs. Dalton looked forward to the pleasure of spending many such evenings at the Grange.

"I think our worst troubles are over now, Earny dearest," said Mr. Montravers, as he took leave of her for the night; "we must expect small ones, but we will help each other to bear them, and then they will be as nothing."

That evening Minnie took the fever. How, no

one knew; but the next morning she awoke Earny to tell her that her throat was most dreadfully sore; and she was so sick.

Earny, in alarm, covered her up in bed, and ran to fetch Mrs. Dalton, who immediately sent for Dr. Biggs.

He pronounced it to be, without doubt, a case of scarlet fever, but not likely to be a bad one, as he knew she would have every care and attention.

Day by day the child grew worse, notwithstanding everything that was done for her; and Mrs. Dalton feared that her last and only child was about to be taken from her.

She and Earny nursed her night and day (it was of no use sending Earny away now, even if she had consented to go), and tried every means of alleviating the poor child's sufferings.

At times, her moans were most distressing; and in her delirium she would stretch out her arms and call for her mamma or Earny, and then when they came to her she would push them away, and say she wanted her sister Earny, who never came home from Hurst Park.

Sometimes she would ask for her pretty sister Clara, and cry because she did not come to her.

Numerous were the inquiries from the Grange. Mrs. Montravers's card was sent every day; but no one was admitted except Miss Vickers. She was a privileged person wherever there was fever.

Grace had very much wished to come and assist Mrs. Dalton and Earny in nursing Minnie; but they would not hear of such a thing, and said they would not even see her if she called. Even Mr. Montravers was never allowed in; he often brought little notes and left them at the door, and then went round by the side of the house into the garden, and Earny would speak to him, just for a minute, from one of the upper windows, but nothing more.

Of course it was of no use to think any more just yet of wedding preparations. Earny told Mr. Montravers she was very sorry, but she knew that he would be very good and patient.

What would be the consequences to him if she caught the fever he could not dwell upon even in his own mind; and he tried to drive away all wild fancies.

For one fortnight Minnie was never left one minute alone; and at the end of that time Dr. Biggs declared all danger to be passed, unless she had a relapse, which they must do all in their power to avoid. She was so very weak that it was not at all improbable she might have one.

Another anxious week passed, and Minnie was able to be taken out of bed and to sit a few minutes at a time in Earny's lap; it was so much more comfortable there than in bed, she thought.

Dr. Biggs came in and found her there one

morning; and laughingly told her she would soon be well enough to nurse her mamma and sister.

"Are they going to be ill, like me?" she asked. "I am so glad I didn't die, because I should like to nurse them."

"Is mamma ill, Earny?"

"No, dear. Dr. Biggs was only in fun."

"Where is mamma?"

"Coming presently, dear. She is gone to get you some jelly."

Just then she came in; and, putting a small glass of jelly on a little table where Earny could reach it for Minnie, whispered a few words to Dr. Biggs, and followed him out of the room.

They had been gone about a quarter of an hour, when Dr. Biggs returned and continued his inquiries about Minnie.

"You must take care of yourself, Miss Molesworth." Earny started. "Miss Dalton, please," she said quickly.

"Did you think Earny was Clara, Dr. Biggs?" asked Minnie, opening wide her large blue eyes in astonishment. "She is dead. Don't you know?"

"I suppose I forgot it, you little puss; but as I was saying, Miss Dalton, you must take care of yourself. I think you had better get a nurse. I shall send you one."

"Whatever should make you think of sending us

a nurse now, Dr. Biggs? Minnie will I hope be soon quite well. I am sure we can nurse her a few days longer."

"But if you should be ill yourself?"

"It will be time enough to get one then," said Earny. "I feel quite well at present, and so does mamma, I am thankful to say. I suppose all danger of infection will soon be over. Will it not?"

"I fear not; and are you sure that your mamma is quite well?"

There was something so peculiar in his look and voice, that Earny started.

"Don't you, Dr. Biggs?" she said hurriedly.

"You have seen her. Do not you?"

"I do not think she is, quite," he replied. "She is gone to lie down a little while; but with care and attention, as I said with Minnie, I hope she will soon be all right again."

"Then she has the fever!" exclaimed Earny, almost before he had finished speaking. "Is it dangerous? Is she very bad? Oh, Dr. Biggs! do please tell me."

"At present it is very slight. I mean what I say. Do not frighten yourself, Miss Dalton. Remember that if you do you will make yourself ill; and what will she do then? You must have a nurse. I know of a capital one. I will send her to you directly."

Earny had been trying to place Minnie back into bed while Dr. Biggs had been speaking, and now asked him if he would remain with her just one minute while she went to her mamma.

"Do not stay more than a minute, and, Miss Dalton," added he, calling her back, "remember you must be very calm; it may be of serious consequences if you are not, both to yourself and her."

It was true! Mrs. Dalton was, as the poor people said, "down with the fever."

She had not felt well all the previous day; but attributing it to fatigue, consequent on nursing, had not mentioned it to Earny, who was only too anxious to take all the care of Minnie on herself. Finding she was getting worse, she waited to hear Dr. Biggs's opinion, before giving her any unnecessary alarm.

Earny did not wait long with her mamma; but hastening back to Dr. Biggs, requested him to fulfil his promise of sending a good nurse, as she owned she could not undertake the care of both.

Dr. Biggs left, laying strict injunctions on her that she was not to over-fatigue herself, and especially not to sit up more than an hour during the night; at least, if she did so, she must make up for it by sleeping through the day, as to take her usual quantity of rest was one of the best ways to prevent infection.

He had not been gone more than half-an-hour,

when the cook came up to say that the nurse whom Dr. Biggs had sent was come. Was she to come up directly?

Earny said "Yes," and was looking forward with something like dread for the appearance of a fussy, disagreeable body, as she imagined all nurses to be, when Miss Vickers entered.

"You do not mean that Dr. Biggs meant you?" said Earny, as after shaking hands with her, Miss Vickers proceeded to take off her bonnet and shawl.

"Why not, my dear?" unless you have any particular objection. I think I understand a little about these things. If you will trust me I will do my best to make them well again."

"You know, dear Miss Vickers, I did not doubt that. It really is very kind of you. What will mamma say? Will you come to her?"

Minnie had fallen asleep; and Miss Vickers accompanied Earny to her mamma's room.

Mrs. Dalton had followed Dr. Biggs directions so far as to lay herself down on the bed, but not undressed. She was just in that disagreeable state of feeling, when one knows there is something to be done, yet one has not the power to do it. She could not bear that Earny should have so much responsibility resting upon her, and it was, therefore, with a feeling of great relief that she welcomed Miss Vickers as her nurse.

For two days she continued much the same



restless and debilitated; weary without knowing why; resting for a while, first in her own room, then in Earny's and Minnie's, wishing to help nurse and take care of Minnie, yet without the strength to do it.

The third day came, and Mrs. Dalton was much worse, and entirely confined to her bed, and, from this time, the disease made rapid progress.

Miss Vickers was, as Dr. Biggs had said, an excellent nurse. Earny could not conceive what she should do without her, for Minnie still required great attention. Poor child! She had never before known what illness was, and the constant confinement to one room could not but be very irksome to her. At times Earny would wrap her up in a large shawl and carry her into her mamma's room for a few minutes; but she was no sooner there than she wished to be taken back to her own again.

As soon as Dr. Biggs thought it safe, she was carried down into the sitting-room and laid upon the sofa, with cook to keep her company; and then Earny, with an aching heart, would take her station by Mrs. Dalton's bed, watching every change in her countenance, and questioning Miss Vickers as to what this and that foretold. Minnie had been very ill; but she was now in a fair way towards recovery, therefore Earny thought her mamma would recover also. The idea of her death was too terrible, too horrible a thing, for her to contemplate; yet the

knowledge that her mamma was suffering was bad enough in itself to make her feel very, very sad.

Days passed on, not flying on silver wings, but dragging on, each after the other, as if loth to follow its predecessors, and Mrs. Dalton was in imminent danger. Dr. Biggs shook his head, and Miss Vickers's looks were ominous.

"We must have the hair off at once, Miss Dalton, and keep the head constantly wet with cold lotions," said Dr. Biggs one morning, after having attentively studied his patient. "I will be here again in an hour. If there is no improvement towards evening, perhaps you will allow me to call in another opinion."

"Is mamma so very, very bad, Dr. Biggs? Do you fear she will—will—die?" Earny was going to say, but she could not frame the word. "Please do not try to deceive me," and Earny looked up at him as if her own life depended on his reply.

"It would be very wrong of me to deceive you, Miss Dalton. You may trust me. There is great, very great danger. I do not say there is no hope."

It was all the same to Earny as if he had. Her mamma was dying, was the sole thought that took possession of her. Oh, that she could die with her! or save her! Could nothing be done? Perhaps some of the clever London doctors might be able to cure her. They should try. What did money matter? Had not Lord Dexham almost commanded

her to apply to him if she wanted any? She would ask him now; and hastily snatching up a sheet of paper, she wrote a few lines, and sent it to the post, with the word "Immediate" written in large characters on the envelope.

## CHAPTER XI.

THE morning after Lord and Lady Dexham's return from Wickhamstead, they seemed as if but just awakened from some long, indistinct, inexplicable dream.

The events of the last two days were jumbled together in one confused mass in their brains, without any semblance of arrangement, and Lord Dexham continually appealed to his wife to know if he were not dreaming still.

At length events began to assume a more definite form, until at last, standing out clearly one by one on a dark foreground, they made the unwilling discovery that the beautiful flowers scenting the room with their delicious perfume had been gathered, not as they had supposed, from the carefully kept grave of their own dearly loved and sadly mourned child, but from that of a changeling.

But changeling though she undoubtedly was,  
VOL. II. P

the place she held in the hearts of Lord and Lady Dexham was as deep, as firm as ever. All her life she had been to them as their child, and she was that still in all but name; that another claimed, and well worthy was she who claimed it to bear it, and out of all the dark, sad reminiscences of the past arose the one comforting thought, that that claimant was none other than their darling Clara's much loved friend, Earnestine Dalton.

Reginal and Lotte had come up early to learn the reason of Lord and Lady Dexham's hasty summons to Wickhamstead, and it was with much difficulty they could credit the statement given them by Lady Dexham; it is true she was by no means explicit, and her husband tried to refresh her memory, but then everything grew more confused than before; therefore, fetching the paper which Earny had given them from Widow Green, he put it into their hands, bidding them read for themselves.

There was no doubting it after perusing that, and, on thinking it over, Lotte recalled to mind many little peculiarities which she had observed in Earny's manner, just about the time that this confession had been made.

"Don't you remember, Reggy," she said, "my remarking one day, how different her manner was to you from what it had been previously, and your saying it was all my fancy. Of course,

she had found out then that you were her own brother."

"Is it not strange," said Reginal, "that she should have had such a dislike to me, without, as I can see, any real cause? I believe she almost hated me."

"Oh! not that, Reggy; I know she had a prejudice against you, but I think the principal reason for that was because some of the girls at school used to make rather a fuss about you when they heard that your father would be some day Lord Dexham, and Earny never could bear any nonsense of that sort; she said it was so disgusting of them—a word she was particularly fond of using when very angry—that it made her almost hate the name of a lord. Dear girl! she never knew then how nearly related she was to one."

"I wonder what Montravers thinks about it. I like him extremely. If Earny had asked me to choose for her, I could not have found any one I should like better for a brother-in-law; so different from that scoundrel of a cousin of ours! I never did like him, but darling Clara was so very fond of him. I wonder what he will think when the news reaches him, as it is sure to do, through some paper? Newsvendors are always too glad of these little episodes in fashionable life, to allow them to pass unnoticed. Just fancy, Lotte, how tricked he would have been, if he had

married dearest Clara; he could not have had her fortune, for that belongs to Earny."

"Oh, yes, he would, Reggy! Did you not hear mamma say that Earny never would have said anything about it, if Clara had lived, because she could not decide what she ought to do?"

"Oh, yes, I remember; few girls would have acted so unselfishly. I must write and claim her for my sister—my second sister—I cannot give up Clara."

And Reginal and Lotte each wrote a long letter to Earnestine, which she received the first morning that Minnie had the fever.

She did not answer them herself, as she had heard that infection was sometimes conveyed by letters; but she asked Mr. Montravers to write for her and explain the reason of her silence, which he did, and from this time all her correspondence had been carried on by him.

He had written to Hurst Park an account of Minnie's illness, and of her progress towards recovery; but at Earny's request, he had not mentioned that Mrs. Dalton also had the fever, as she guessed that if Lady Dexham knew it, she would at once come to assist her in her double nursing; and Earny thought of her nephew and nieces at the Park Cottage, and feared lest she might bear infection home with her.

Such had been her fears, until she heard that

her mamma was dying; then they were all swallowed up in the one great desire to save her, as she hastily despatched her note to Lady Dexham.

Lady Dexham was thinking of Wickhamstead when the servant brought in the letters, and the sight of Earny's own handwriting for an instant made her think that Minnie was quite well again; but the "Immediate" caught her eye, and tearing open the letter, she exclaimed to Lord Dexham, who was reading his newspaper, "We must telegraph to London immediately; Mrs. Dalton is dying! Earny wants a physician sent down directly. Whom shall we have?"

Lord Dexham took the note, cast his eye over it, saying, "Dr. Barbould; he is the most experienced in fevers;" rang the bell to order his horse to be brought to the door in five minutes.

"I will go myself, my dear," he said, "and wait for the answer back. If he cannot go, we must get another. Had you not better get ready to go to Wickhamstead by the next train? the poor girl must not be left alone; if Mrs. Dalton dies, you are the most proper person to be with her."

Lady Dexham wanted no urging; though still firm in her allegiance to Clara, yet the knowledge that Earny was really her own child, made her heart burn towards her; and, though perfectly



conscious that what her husband had said and done was right, yet she had a secret longing to see Earny restored to her proper position in the world.

Lord Dexham rode fast, and by the time he returned, saying, that Dr. Barbauld would be at Wickhamstead as early in the afternoon as possible, Lady Dexham was already in the carriage which was to convey her to the station.

"If Earny is not satisfied, and would like a third opinion, telegraph at once for Dr. Dunsford," were his parting words, as the train started. "If anything happens, bring her and Minnie home with you."

The blinds were all drawn up, and the windows thrown wide open at the cottage, as Lady Dexham drove up to the door, therefore she saw that there was still hope.

The cook answered the summons, and though she had received strict orders on no account to admit any one but Dr. Biggs, she considered that this, of course, was to be an exception, and ushered the visitor into the back room overlooking the garden, where little Minnie was lying, pale and snappy, on the sofa, trying to amuse herself with her doll.

She jumped up as Lady Dexham came towards her, and, putting her thin, wasted arms around her neck, exclaimed, "Oh, I am so glad somebody is

come! Will you help poor Earny make mamma well again; and will you ask sister Earny not to cry so very much? It makes me feel so bad here;" and the poor child placed her little hand on her chest.

"How are you? Are you better, my little pet?" asked Lady Dexham, kissing her, and taking her little thin hands in her own; she had not expected to see the child so changed.

"Yes, thank you, Lady Dexham, I am better; Dr. Biggs says I am almost well. I wish I could run up and down stairs to help poor sister Earny, and dear Miss Vickers. Do you know Miss Vickers?" continued Minnie, in a brighter tone; "she is so kind to me; I love her, I do."

Earny then came in; for a few moments she was too much overcome to speak, and Lady Dexham was greatly shocked as she marked what a change three few weeks of nursing and anxiety had made in her appearance.

"Have you brought any one?" she at length asked. "It will be too late soon! Oh, Lady Dexham, won't you save her?" burst from Earny's lips; "I could not live without her!"

"Dr. Barbauld is coming as early as possible this afternoon; he may be here directly. Earny, my own dear child, we will do all we can; may I see her? Perhaps I might think of something to relieve her, before he comes."

Earny led her up-stairs; the "own dear child,"

from Lady Dexham's lips, fell harshly on her ear ; she did not wish to hear them from any one, save from her who was, she feared, to pronounce them never again.

There was no fear of Mrs. Dalton being disturbed by the arrival of any fresh face, for she knew no one.


For days she had been perfectly unconscious, tossing about in wild delirium, calling upon Earny to come back to her, she could not part from her ; or lying quietly on her pillow, expending her strength in one continued muttering.

Miss Vickers was applying cold lotions to her head as Lady Dexham entered, and as she moved back to allow her to see her the better, Mrs. Dalton partly raised her eyes, and Lady Dexham thought she heard her pronounce her name, but it was not repeated.

"Your ladyship is mistaken, I assure you," said Miss Vickers ; "it was only the usual muttering ; it never stops now."

"What is your opinion ?" asked Lady Dexham, as Earny carried her bonnet and cloak into the next room.

"The worst that can be, your ladyship ; if these mutterings would but cease, I should say there might be just one gleam of hope, but there is none unless they do. Dear Miss Dalton, she trusts so much to the physician's opinion, I fear the truth



will almost kill her. Will your ladyship enforce your commands to make her take some rest? I assure you she wants it; she has not been to bed for two nights."

Lady Dexham and Earny sat together for some time, and then Lady Dexham promised to go to Minnie, and try to amuse her, if Earny would lie down for an hour, just to get her strength up for Dr. Barbauld's visit.

"You don't think I could sleep," she asked, "do you? Besides, I must see Dr. Biggs and tell him about Dr. Barbauld."

Lady Dexham promised to do all that, and to wake her the moment Dr. Barbauld arrived. After a while, she reluctantly complied, and notwithstanding her repeated assertions that she could not sleep, she was so worn out with watching and anxiety, that she soon fell into a sound slumber.

Dr. Biggs came, and having heard who was expected, said he should be near the station about the time the next train would arrive, and would therefore wait and bring Dr. Barbauld back with him.

Earny was still sleeping when they were shown in where Lady Dexham was helping Minnie to build brick houses, and telling her tales about her little grandchildren at home.

"Is this a little patient for me?" said Dr. Barbauld, after having spoken to Lady Dexham, and lifting the pale, flaxen-haired, blue-eyed Minnie

from her lap to her own; "she wants change of air, Lady Dexham; there is too much languor here, a great deal. A little sea air would be best, though I should not advise the bathing, it is too late in the year for that. Would you like to go to the sea, my dear?" he asked.

Minnie had been looking up into his face as if anxiously waiting to say something to him, and as soon as he had finished speaking, instead of answering his question, she said, "Are you the gentleman who is coming to make my mamma well again?"

"I hope so, dear; I am come to try."

"Then I shall kiss you;" and she put up her little mouth to his. "And don't let sister Earny get ill, will you?" she continued; "we couldn't do anything without Earny, not mamma and I couldn't."

"What a dear child!" exclaimed Dr. Barbould, and he was just going to ask Dr. Biggs some question about her, when Lady Dexham returned to show them up-stairs. She had awakened Earny on her way.

"Will you follow me?" she said, and placing Minnie comfortably on the sofa, she led them up-stairs.

"I think if you will leave us a little to ourselves," said Dr. Biggs to Lady Dexham, with a glance at Earny, who had stationed herself at the foot of her

mamma's bed, "we shall be better able to give you our opinion presently."

Earny understood the hint, and left the room.

It seemed a long, long time to her before they came down; and then, without reference to her, as she was standing by the open door, they entered the unoccupied drawing-room, and closed themselves in. She caught but one glance of Dr. Biggs's face, and from that she could learn nothing.

She dared not go up to her mamma, fearing Dr. Barbauld would leave without her having the opportunity of speaking to him, and sitting down on the lowest stair, opposite the drawing-room door, she waited until they came out.

Scarcely was Dr. Barbauld's foot on the threshold, than, with a slight bound, she laid both her hands on his arm, and, in a tone of enforced calmness, said, "Dr. Barbauld, will she die?"

The question was so straightforward, so exactly to the point, that Dr. Barbauld was at a loss for a reply, and in his hesitation Earny learnt the whole truth.

"When?" she again asked, not needing any further reply to her former question.

"She may linger a few days; it is not certain."

"Thank you!" she exclaimed, and bounding up two stairs at once, opened the door of her own bedroom, and closing it after her, threw herself on the bed in a fit of hysterical weeping.

It was all over now; the physician had been, and there was no hope. Her mamma would be taken from her. Oh! that she could die; die with her, her own dear mamma! (she forgot then that she was not her own). How should she live without her? The world would be so desolate, and Earny buried her face in the pillow to stifle her convulsive sobbing.

Long she lay thus; Lady Dexham and Miss Vickers had tried the door several times, but they found it bolted and could gain no admittance.

At length her strength was exhausted, she could cry no more; and lying still, in utter prostration, came to her the thought of how the little sick child below would be left an orphan, with no one to care for her save herself, and that she must live to be a mother to her, and with this thought came another, of one who had been so good, so kind, so patient, who was very dear to her, who would care for nought in life without her; and she rose from her bed resolved to be to each of them, in particular, all that a wife and a mother should be.

She went into Mrs. Dalton's room and took the vacant chair by the bed. Lady Dexham and Miss Vickers were both there, and as they looked at her they felt there was no need to hide anything from her, she already knew the worst.

Hour by hour she sat there, ministering to every little want of her mamma — bathing her burning

forehead, moistening her parched lips, calmly and submissively; and Miss Vickers wondered at her, it was so different from what she had expected.

Three days thus passed, and the end was near. Dr. Barbauld had said there might be a few intervals of consciousness towards the last, and with intense longing did Earny watch and listen, hoping to hear once more those dearly loved tones addressed to her, unaccompanied by the mutterings of delirium.

It was early in the afternoon. Earny was seated in her usual place beside the bed, and Miss Vickers was arranging some things on the table (Lady Dexham was down stairs with Minnie), when Mrs. Dalton opened her eyes, and casting them around the room as if in search of something, rested them in a peculiar manner on Earny's anxious face. The light of reason had returned.

"Earny," she murmured, in tones so faint that Earny could scarcely catch them; "Earny, my own dear, precious Earny, I am going to leave you. I thought you were gone away."

Earny bent over her, and pressing a deep impassioned kiss on the burning forehead, whispered, "I have never left you, dearest mamma, never."

"I suppose it was my fancy, my darling. Will you take care of my Minnie, my poor little Minnie?"

"Mamma, trust me; my daily prayer shall be



that I may be to her what you have been to me." Earny's words were few; she wanted not to waste one of these precious moments. Her heart was bursting.

"Make her like yourself, my true, my ever-loving child."

"Like you, if I can, mamma."

"She will not be quite dependant, Earny. Take anything and everything you like to keep for my sake, my own; and the rest is hers. Where is she?"

Miss Vickers glided out of the room to fetch her, but before she returned with her and Lady Dexham, Mrs. Dalton was unconscious again.

Mr. Montravers called soon afterwards. He had persisted ever since Mrs. Dalton had been so seriously ill in coming in for a few minutes every day, just to assure himself that Earny was well; and to undertake any commission, or to bring some little delicacies for Mrs. Dalton. The splendid grapes on the side-table, the cooling drinks, the invigorating perfumes, were all his gifts or Grace's.

Mrs. Montravers did not dare approach the cottage, and she also prevented Grace and Nannette from doing so; but she daily sent her inquiries by her son, and offers of assistance through him.

While Earny was with him, just for about five minutes, Mrs. Dalton was again herself. Lady Dexham and Miss Vickers were with her, but

before Miss Vicker could fetch Earny, her mind was wandering off again.

Earny was very vexed ; it was the only time she had left her mamma's side that day, and she resolved to do so no more. She asked Miss Vickers if she would kindly bring Minnie up to her ; and when the child came they all sat there quietly together waiting until the change might come.

It was getting late. Dr. Biggs had been and was gone ; and Minnie had fallen fast asleep on her sister's lap ; when Mrs. Dalton, again opening her eyes, beckoned with her finger as if for Earny to come near her. Her voice was almost inaudible, " Let me kiss her, Earny."

Earny lifted up the little sleeping child to receive her dying mother's kiss, but it did not awake her.

" Good-by, my little orphan child," she whispered. " You will never feel a mother's loss. Teach her to love me, Earny. The others are all there, teach her to follow us ; and you, my Earny." She paused, then gathering strength, continued, " I have told Lady Dexham about—all, about what was going to happen. You will agree to her wishes, my child. Promise me, they are mine."

" Yes, yes ; dearest, dearest mamma !" Earny almost lost her self-control. Had her mamma asked her never to speak another word to Mr. Montrovers in her whole life, she would have said yes, then.

“Thank you, my child; thank you all. Lady Dexham, Miss Vickers, all.” She tried to look at each as she pronounced their names; and then, with Earny’s hand clasped tightly within her own, she once more closed her eyes, never again to open them in this world.

Five minutes more and she and Clara were together.

We will not dwell upon the scene which followed. No one had any power to comfort Earny, save little Minnie; but when, in paroxysms of grief, Earny would catch hold of her and almost smother her with kisses, calling her her own dear mamma’s own little Minnie, and the child tried to wipe away the tears, and begged her not to cry no more, it made her so unhappy, she thought how little she was doing to comfort Minnie, and for her sake tried to appear more calm.

Earny sometimes thought that she was very selfish to be so unhappy when all around her were so kind. Lady Dexham was quite like a mother to her; and good, kind Miss Vickers used her best efforts to soothe the weeping children, while Mr. Montravers and Grace were, notwithstanding their own sorrow, for they both loved Mrs. Dalton, unwearied in their kind attention; but none of this, Earny knew, could bring her back her own, her precious mamma.

Lady Dexham tried to interest her in the funeral

arrangements ; but, beyond requesting that everything might be as deep as possible, she left all to Lady Dexham and Mr. Montravers. " They understood it so much better than she did," she said.

Minnie was her chief care now. The roses must be brought back to those pale cheeks—strength to that languid frame.

The coffin was closed almost immediately to prevent infection, so prevalent after death ; but before it was done, Earny had so far overcome Minnie's fear of the dead as to get her to look once on those loved remains ; and far from feeling frightened, as she had imagined would be the case, Minnie said that her mamma looked just like her dolly, the one she had washed the cheeks of when it was asleep, and in after life she never forgot it.

The day for the funeral came, Earny had much wished to follow the body to the grave, but every one opposed her wish. She was not told the reason until a few hours before the time appointed for it to leave the house, when Lady Dexham, drawing Earnestine towards her, said softly, " Though separated in life, in their graves they shall not be divided ;" and then Earny learnt that the grave under the old beech tree had been opened, the flowers must be again planted.

Mr. Montravers headed the procession as chief

mourner, and at the station was met by Lord Dexham and Mr. Molesworth.

The grave was again closed; the flowers were replanted. As Lady Dexham had said, in their grave they were not divided.

Oh! when it was all gone—when everything had disappeared in the distance, how Earny hugged Minnie, and Minnie clung to Earny. The poor child seemed to realize that she had no one now to take care of her but her dear sister Earny, and she on her part regarded Minnie as a precious charge entrusted to her keeping.

Dr. Biggs prescribed change of air for both of them. He said he felt sure that if Earny had had any predisposition for fever, it would have shown itself long ago, and therefore they might now safely leave home.

For herself, Earny would have refused, but not if it were needful for Minnie. Everything must give way to her now, and thus she consented to the plan.

The arrangements were soon made; seals were put on all Minnie's property, and the house left in Miss Vickers's charge.

Mr. Montravers had been to Torquay and engaged a house for two months, at the end of which time Lady Dexham hoped that Minnie's health would be quite restored. It sometimes occurred to her that her constitution might be like that of her sister Clara.

The parting from her home, her own dear home, in which she had known so much happiness, was a sad trial to Earny, but she tried to forget her own sorrow in thinking of all the benefit her little Minnie would derive from the change.

And her hopes were not disappointed. Though late in the year, the mild air of Torquay brought back the colour to her cheeks, and buoyancy to her spirit, and Earny grew almost herself again in her loving care for her little adopted child.

Lord Dexham had been to see them several times, and Mr. Montravers almost lived there; he could not do so entirely, for business in London sometimes obliged him to be absent; but when with her, Earny felt that she had never fully appreciated his goodness, his kindness, his gentleness, his love for her until now; and Minnie, too, had learnt to call him, at his request, her dear big brother Vernon.

Earny had been especially careful that Minnie should still suppose her to be her own sister. There was no necessity for her ever to know the contrary she thought; but busy tongues were abroad. The episode in fashionable life, as Reginald had called it, had got wind, and Lady Dexham and her party were continually the topic of conversation.

One day, poor little Minnie came running into her sister's room, and threw herself into her arms,

weeping bitterly. It was sometime before Earny could understand what was the matter with her, but at last she learnt in broken sentences from Minnie, that that ugly old woman downstairs (the housekeeper) had been telling Susan that little Miss Minnie was not really the sister of the tall young lady; that they were no relations at all, and a lot more, of which Minnie understood nothing, except that Earny was not her sister.

"But you are my sister, Earny, are you not? You will always be when you are married, won't you, Earny? Was not she telling stories?"

"They are very foolish to talk so," Earny said, taking her on her lap and wiping away her tears. "You will always be my little sister. You will believe me, Minnie," and Minnie was satisfied.

They were to leave Torquay on the morrow, and Lady Dexham and Earny were sitting together by the bright firelight, when Lady Dexham said, "Earny, my dear, before Mrs. Dalton died, she gave me a very precious gift, one that you value very much. You will not grudge it me, I hope?"

"Everything is Minnie's, Lady Dexham. I am sure she will not."

"I don't mean that she shall, Earny, dear; neither must you. She gave me Minnie for my own, because Mr. Montravers is to have you.

She is to be mine, but her heart will be yours always."

If this was her mamma's wish she had promised to obey it. Minnie would still be her own always.

The next day they left for Hurst Park.



## CHAPTER XII.

## THE MARRIAGE BELLS DO RING.

SIX months have passed away. It is a lovely summer morning, neither too hot nor too cold, but of that delicious medium when one feels almost soothed to sleep by the soft balmy air around one, and all Wickhamstead is in a stir.

Guests are arriving quickly at Minnie's little cottage, all dressed in bridal array. Minnie is very happy, for she is to be the principal bridesmaid.

The cottage has been visited many times during the past six months, so that the vacant chair has become quite a natural object to look upon; but Earny's eyes fall on it very often this morning. Nevertheless there is a quiet flow of happiness in her heart.

She looks so good, so noble, so true, nay, almost beautiful, as she stands before the mirror, and stoops forward to allow Grace to adjust one of the flowers in her bridal wreath. It is Clara's

wreath; she had not forgotten that, and the eye-lashes are rather wet as Grace impresses a hearty kiss on the blushing cheek, as a finale to her office of maid, and runs off to take her place by Minnie's side in the first carriage, with Mr. Molesworth and Lotte.

Scarcely had she left the room, when Lady Dexham entered.

"Are you ready, dearest?" She tried not to think of Clara, as the vision in bridal array rose up before her, but she could not help it.

"Quite, thank you. Must I come now?"

"In one minute, dearest. Your bouquet—have you it?"

Earny turned to the side-table and took up one of the most beautiful bouquets that eyes ever rested on; the sight of it gave her courage, she thought of the donor; in less than half-an-hour she should be his wife.

"If you please, your ladyship, the carriage is at the door."

"Earny!"

Lord Dexham handed in his daughter, then his wife; the door was closed, and in ten minutes they were at the church.

Every effort had been used to keep the event as secret as possible, yet the church was densely crowded; so much so, that it was with difficulty the bridal party could reach the altar rails.

The history of Earny's life had become known to almost all there assembled, and loud whispers of "God bless her!" broke the silence of expectation, as Lord Dexham led her up the aisle.

Then all voices were again hushed, and the responses sounded out clear and full, as if a strong, unfaltering resolution sent them forth from the deep recesses of the heart.

The blessing was pronounced, and Earnestine arose from her knees the long-loved, long-wished-for wife of Mr. Vernon Montravers.

The first kiss was his, but Minnie no sooner saw what was going forward, than throwing down Earny's splendid bouquet, which she had been obliged to hold with both hands, she clasped her arms around her sister's neck, exclaiming, "Oh, you do look so beautiful! Mr. Montravers thinks so, too; I see he does. You are still my own sister Earny now, are you not?"

"Yes, and mine also," said Grace, and her turn came next.

The names were signed. It was the first and only time that Earny ever subscribed herself Earnestine Molesworth.

"God bless ye!" "Happiness to both of ye!" "Long may ye live amongst us!" rose on the air as they again entered the carriages; but the sounds were drowned by the merry peal of bells that then

burst forth from the old tower of Wickamstead Church.

Back again to the cottage, a quiet breakfast followed; it was Earny's wish that there should be no pomp, no splendour. She knew how sad to Lord and Lady Dexham would be the reminiscences that such an affair would recall to them, did it take place at Hurst Park, and had therefore requested that the ceremony might be performed at Wickamstead.

Few were the guests, but amongst them was kind, good Miss Vickers, who had voluntarily undertaken to superintend all the wedding preparations; and had Dick been present; such is the contrariety of human nature, he would most undoubtedly have declared that she was growing vain in her old age.

The adieux were said, the last kisses given; Minnie's was the very last, and Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Montravers departed *en route* for the Tyrol.

Mr. and Mrs. Molesworth returned the same day to Hurst Park, but Lord Dexham remained with his wife and Minnie at Wickamstead, to make some arrangements about the letting of the cottage. It was all Minnie's own; the furniture became hers at Mrs. Dalton's death, and the cottage itself had been Earny's gift to her on her wedding-day.

When these were completed, they also returned to Hurst Park, for that was to be henceforth Minnie's home.

Two months later and a carriage drew up at the Grange—a carriage and pair, not a coach and six—and the dark eyes that had gazed so fondly towards the West, looked lovingly into those of Earnestine Montravers, as her husband handed her into the hall, where Grace was waiting to receive her, saying, "Here she is, Gracie! I have brought my wife home at last."

Captain Macclaughton remained abroad. Before the secret of Earny's birth reached him he had married a German countess, and was squandering away her fortune in the Kursaal of Wisbaden, while she, poor creature, remained neglected at home, bitterly lamenting the day when first the handsome young Englishman had made an impression on her heart. He never returned to pay his debts, and dying without a son, before his father, Sir John Macclaughton, his second brother, who gave every promise of following his father's good example, succeeded to the estates.

Miss Vickers continued to live at Wickamstead, and proved herself to be truly the good-spirit of the place; and years after, on Dick's return to England, with the rank of colonel, one of his first visits was paid to her.

Betty never left her; she told Jim she was

getting too old for any of his nonsense, and meant to remain as she was; therefore he might go about his business: whereupon he went off to sea, and people said he died of a broken heart; but Betty said "she didn't believe it, more fool he if he did."

Minnie's home was, as we have said, at Hurst Park, where she became the pet, the darling, the beloved of all. Aunt Minnie was always in requisition everywhere. Little Freddy declared he never had a downright game of romps unless she was with him; and, as she grew older, her likeness to Clara became so strong, notwithstanding that her eyes were blue and her hair flaxen, that Lord and Lady Dexham would sometimes fancy that the old days had come back again, and that she was their own, their much-loved child; while the villagers gazed on her with reverence, and blessed her, at first for the sake of the departed, and then for her own.

Part of each year she spent with her own dear sister Earny at the Grange, or in London; and the time soon came when there was almost a rivalry between the little cousins as to who loved Aunt Minnie best, and whom she loved best. We think her preference lay within the Grange; they were Earny's children.

But she loved everybody, and everybody loved her; and day by day, as she walked off with her watering-pot and rake, down to her own peculiar property, the narrow grave under the old beech

tree, the sexton would breathe a prayer that it might be long, very long, before he was again called upon to open it.

Minnie's birthday present to her ever dear sister Earny, was always a bouquet of flowers, gathered under the consecrated shade of the old beech tree.

THE END









